

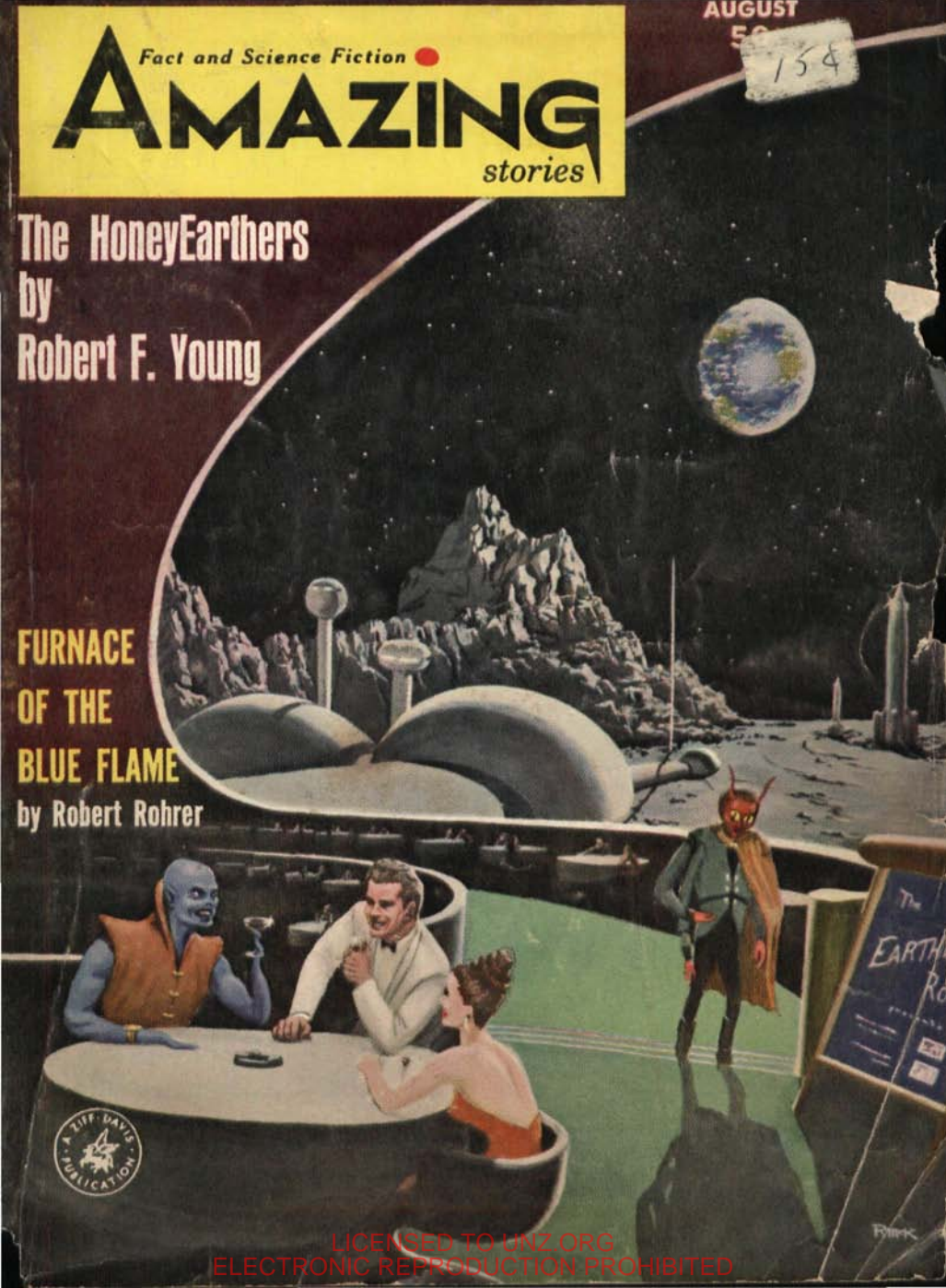
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Fact and Science Fiction ●
AMAZING
stories

The HoneyEarthers
by
Robert F. Young

FURNACE
OF THE
BLUE FLAME
by Robert Rohrer



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WHEN THE IDOLS WALKED

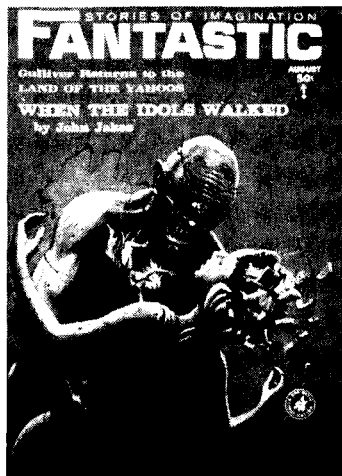
by john jakes

Brak the Barbarian, with only the power of his sword-arm as defense, finds himself entangled in a feud between the cunning sorceress Ilona and two of the god-statues: Ashtir the Fruitful and Jaal the Leveler.

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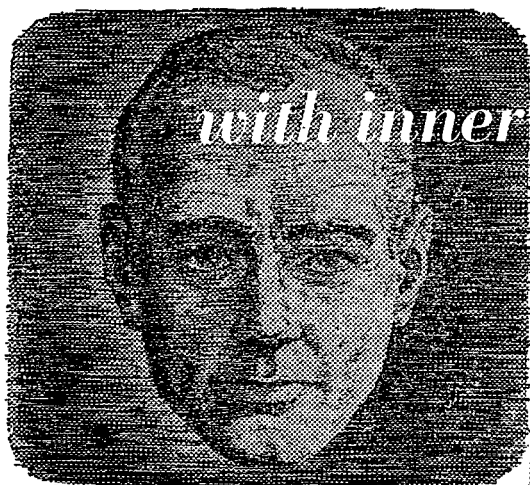
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AUGUST, 1964
Vol. 38, No. 8

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Cover: Richard McKenna

Illustrating *The HoneyEartHers*

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THE long-discussed and oft-maligned Wegener theory of continental drift has been picking up new adherents lately. It's sorta too bad, though, that a whole country has virtually to split down the middle in order to give renewed respectability to the idea.

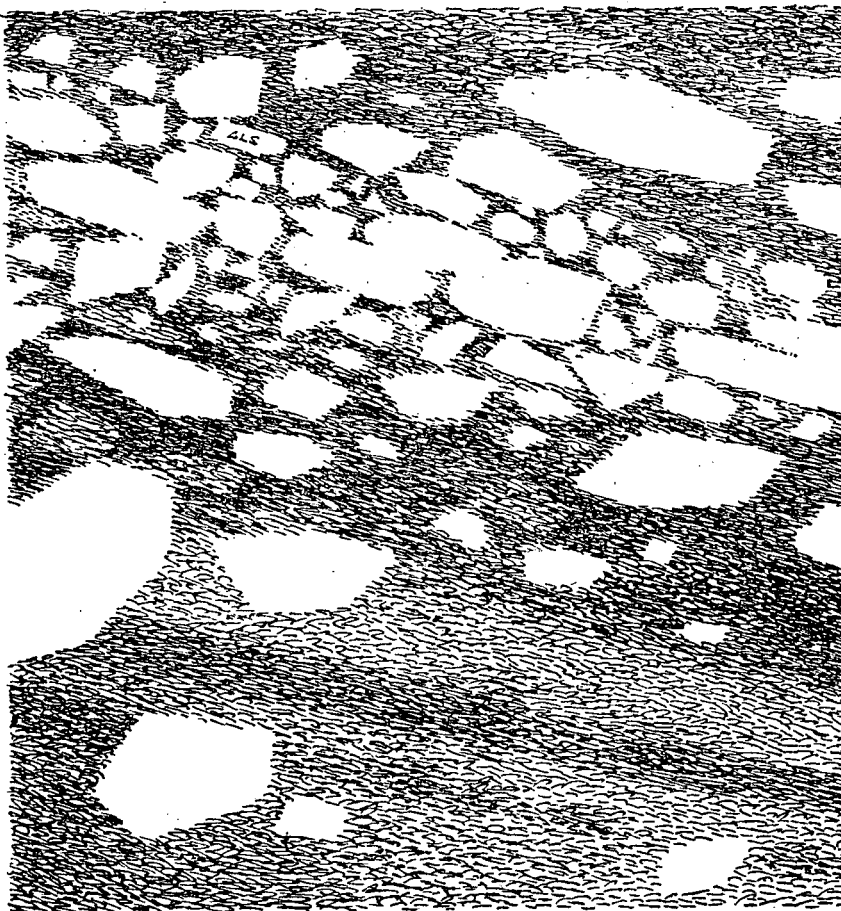
The continental drift theory, as you probably know, was put forth in the early 1900's by a German geologist named Alfred Lothar Wegener. In effect, he said that all the land area of the planet was originally in one mass—to which has been given the name Gondwanaland—and that the continental shapes we know today resulted from the breakup and subsequent drifting apart of the land masses.

As evidence for Wegener's theory of continental movement, geophysicists have found in ancient lava streams bits of fossilized magnetized iron. Their ends still pointed to where the magnetic pole must have been situated when the lava immobilized

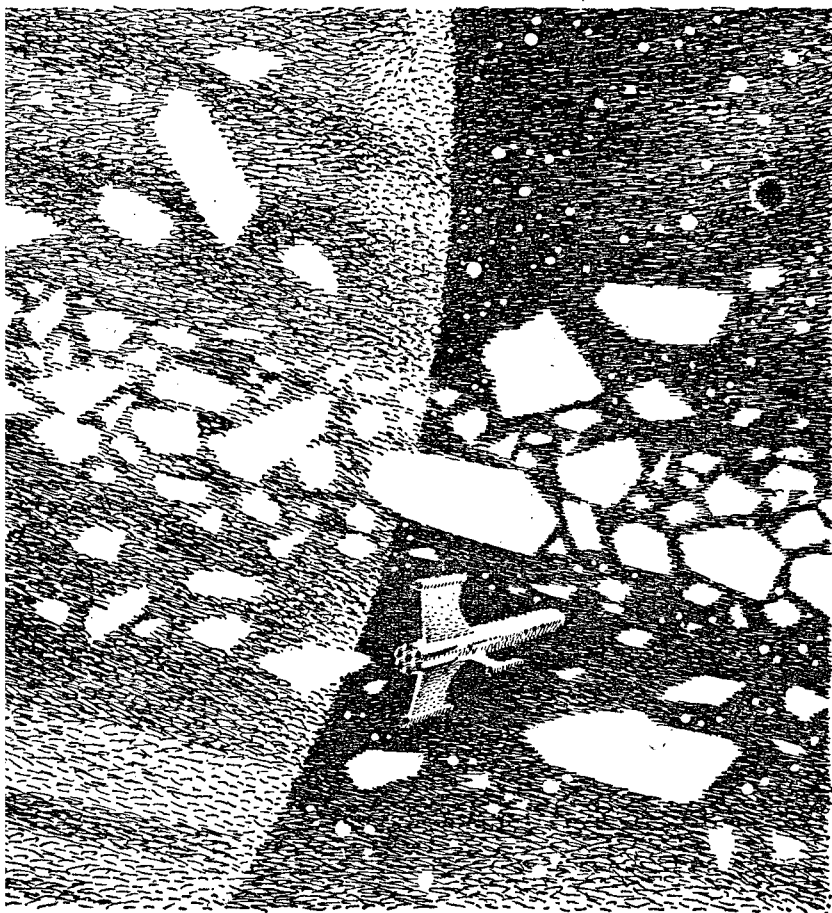
the filings millions of years ago. After enough beds of fossilized iron had been unearthed—pointing in all sorts of directions—it was possible to plot and trace the wanderings of the magnetic pole, apparently from a point near what is now California, to the south Pacific Ocean, to where it is today. Of course anyone pointing to more obvious facts—such as that the bulge of eastern South America fits right under the shoulder of western Africa—was considered a romancer. And Wegener's theory never quite won a full measure of scientific credibility.

Now, however, Iceland appears to be splitting in half, down the middle. As the only substantial land mass lying athwart the northern terminus of the submerged mountain chain known as the mid-Atlantic Ridge, some scientists are saying it is likely that the fissures splitting Iceland are the result of continental drift. In addition to actual open-

(Continued on page 130)



Not often does a science-fiction writer essay a love story. This is, in many ways, a love story. Of a man for a son, of a man for a woman, of a man for lost worlds and space and time. And of a woman's love for courage.



The HoneyEarthers
by
Robert F. Young

Illustrated by SCHELLING

And Absalom rode upon a mule, and the mule went under the thick boughs of a great oak, and his head caught hold of the oak, and he was taken up between the heaven and the earth; and the mule that was under him went away.

—2 Samuel 18:9

THE kid thrilled as the first ice-grapnel hurtled forth from the *Ganymede's* belly gun and sank its giant fingers into the orbiting floe. The other members of the grapnel crew stood by indifferently, their faces stolid behind the visi-visors of their helmets; but the kid was only fifteen and this was his first trip to the rings, and for him there was magic in every moment of the day and night.

The floe gave a slight shudder when the belly-gun crew tautened the grapnel cable, but it did not deviate from its orbit. The ring floes ranged in size from the dimensions of a medium-sized mountain. This one was as large as a hill—as large, in fact, as the great green hill that rose beyond the junior citizen's home that the kid had run away from before lying about his age and getting a job as an apprentice grapnelman with one of the waterlanes companies. Unlike the orphanage hill, however, the floe wasn't green. It was gray.

The *Ganymede's* belly gun spoke again, and a second grapnel leaped through the glinting mist of ice particles that fringed the rings, and found the floe. Again, the floe shuddered when the cable slack was taken up; again, it remained true to its orbit. Beyond it, and before and behind and “below” and “above” it—and as far as the eye could see—other floes marched in the awesome orbital parade that had brought Saturn fame and Earthmen fortunes.

A third grapnel found its mark. A fourth and a fifth and a sixth. Now the time had come for the grapnel crew to go into action. The kid checked his knee-crampons, made certain that his ice-hook was within easy reach of his left hand. In his bulky spacesuit he felt as big and as capable as the other members of the crew. With them, he descended the six steel ladders that ran down the floe freighter's hull to the cable apertures, and with them he started crawling out over the cables toward the floe. His grapnel was no. 4. When he reached it he removed his ice-hook from his belt, took a bite with it, and dug his knee-crampons into the ice. Then he began stringing the reinforcing lines that were attached to the grapnel's “wrist”. There were three of them altogether, and the object was to spread them out and

secure their ends to the side of the floe that faced away from the freighter.

SATURN's massive bulk occulted the sun, but there was plenty of starlight to see by. The kid worked industriously, determined to prove that he was as fast as the next man. He got one line strung out, and secured it by means of the self-driving piton at its end. He got the second line into place, went back for the third. Stringing it, he looked around at the other grapnelmen. To his chagrin, he saw that their lines were already in place and that they were cramponing back toward the cables.

Angrily, he activated the final piton, and started cramponing "over the hill" himself. He'd show them! He'd—

He must have taken too big a bite with his ice-hook. He could not get his right knee far enough in under him to sink its crampon. Furious with himself, he gripped the underpart of the leg with his right hand and added the strength of his biceps to the strength of his rectus femoris. It was the worst thing he could have done, and if he had been thinking clearly he would have known it. His left crampon broke free, and both knees went out from in under him and he was left clinging to his ice-hook with one hand.

He supplemented his hold with his other hand; then, to his horror, he felt the hook pull free. A moment later, he was drifting in space a few feet from the surface of the floe.

The feet might just as well have been miles. "May-day! May-day!" he shouted into his helmet transmitter. "Acknowledge! Acknowledge!"

Silence.

He shouted the words again. And again and again. Each time, the silence grew louder. Abruptly he remembered that all during the stringing operation the scattered small talk that usually went on among the older grapnelmen had been absent from his ears, and simultaneously he remembered he hadn't checked his helmet radio for days.

Well, he'd just have to wait till the rest of the crew missed him and came back for him—that was all. But suppose they didn't miss him soon enough? Suppose they didn't notice his absence until after the floe had been taken on board and dropped into the vat? Although he no longer had contact with the floe, he was a prisoner of its mass, and wherever the floe went, he would go too. And the floe was going into the *Ganymede's* vat. And the temperature of the *Ganymede's* vat during grapneling operations was maintained at an even 300 degrees.

The kid was only fifteen years old and this was his first trip to the rings and this was the first time he had ever looked upon the face of death. He did the only thing he could do under the circumstances—he panicked. And when the slow turning of his body brought his feet in line with the surface of the floe, he doubled up his legs and thrust out with them with all his might. His feet struck the floe solidly, and the resultant impetus sent him drifting into the rings.

How deep into the rings he went before he managed to sink his ice-hook into another floe, he did not know. But he knew that thanks to his impulsive action it was now next to impossible for the crew of the *Ganymede* to find him; that once they discovered he was no longer on the original floe, they probably wouldn't even try to find him. Such a search would be both impractical and time-consuming, and he was nothing but a homeless kid whom no one would miss anyway.

He dug his crampons into the floe and clung tightly to the ice-hook with both hands. Space-fright seized him and shook him till his brain seemed to implode; till the sound of his own screams caused him to go temporarily deaf. He closed his eyes, still screaming, still clinging to the glinting surface of the floe. Nothingness broke around him

in great dark waves, and churned and swirled and eddied; and then, suddenly, the nothingness gave way to awareness, and he remembered where he was.

When he opened his eyes he saw that the floe wasn't as deep in the rings as he had thought. Then he saw the ship. He had known then that he wasn't going to die after all, but what he had not known was that part of him was already dead.

I

WHEN Aaron Price stepped from the lift onto the mobile boarding platform, she was standing among the Honey-Earthers, waiting for him. But she was not a HoneyEarther, nor was he. And yet he loved her. Loved her the way robins love spring rains, the way gulls love uplifting autumn winds, the way meadowlarks love the morning sun. For to him, Fleurette was all of these things—and many more.

She was carrying a small overnight bag that matched the blueness of her coat, and her willowy legs were like the stems of flowers. Behind her, the HoneyEarth Express pointed like a stubby finger toward the star-clad sky. Carrying his own overnight bag, he went over to her and said, softly so that he would not be overheard, "I'm glad you



came. I wouldn't have blamed you if you hadn't."

"But I'd have blamed myself."

"It'll be all right. We'll have to take one of their famous double rooms, of course——there aren't any others available. But I'll give you the golden key, and it'll be the same as staying in any other hostel."

"When did he run away?" she asked. "You didn't tell me over the phone."

"Last night."

"And you don't think he'll ever come back?"

Price shook his head. "I know he won't. He can't."

Her gray eyes misted, and she turned away. But not before he glimpsed the single tear that rolled starlike down her gentle cheek. The girlish lines of her nose and chin came through his sadness and touched his heart, and he found it hard to believe that she was nearing thirty. He rejoiced in the luster of her up-swept dark-brown hair. Then he saw the faint bruise on her temple, and suddenly he wanted to cry and simultaneously he wanted to kill; but it was too late for crying, and he had already numbered the days of his life on the fingers of his hand.

He became aware that the HoneyEarthers were staring at him—the HoneyEarthers from Earth, and the HoneyEarthers from Croewl and Fargastar and

remote Guanlago who were sojourning on Earth and who, in a chronological sense, were as incongruous as he was. Well let them stare, he thought. Stares weren't stones, and men with partners young enough to be their daughters were no new thing under the sun.

The locks of the HoneyEarth Express swung wide, and a voluptuous "moonmiad" stepped into the glare of the gantry lights. "Loveflight 6235-B," she announced in crooning tones. "Departure time, 1900 hours; arrival time, 0102 hours. All aboard, you lucky lovers you!"

With her bare legs and her half-bare breasts, she reminded Price of the fun girls who walked the arcades of the lower cities. Why was it that society leered at HoneyEarthers? Why was it that HoneyEarth hostels like the Earthlight Inn deliberately discolored their services with excessive overtones of sex? Why was it that people were so eager to reduce love to the dimensions of a dirty joke and so reluctant to accord it its proper place in the sun?

CONFETTI-like synthi-rice was drifting down from an overhead dispenser as he handed the moonmaid the two tickets he had bought that afternoon. He was careful not to meet her eyes, for he knew all too well the cal-

culating look she was giving his spaceburned aging face and the concomitant look she was giving Fleurette's young loveliness. In the ship, he followed Fleurette up the spiral stairway to the third level where their reserved seat was. It was more like a lounge than a seat, and the compartment contained three others just like it. After removing their coats and sitting down, they buckled their acceleration belts in place and looked through the portscope at the distant lights of Greater Boston. Presently Fleurette turned and faced him. "Poor Aron *pere*," he said softly. "He hurt you as much as he did me, didn't he."

Price nodded. "I'll never forgive him for what he did—never."

"But you *have* to forgive him. Ronny's your son."

"I can't forgive him. And when I've said what I have to say, you'll understand why."

"Then say it, Aron *pere*."

"I can't—not now. Not without a drink to see me through. I'll say it over starwine on the moon—that way, it won't be so bad."

"Is that why you're taking me to such an exotic place?"

"No," Price said. "I'm taking you there because Ronny should have and never did. And because I don't relish the publicity that always accompanies a tax scandal, and the moon is one of the

last places in the cosmos the fax-ferrets will expect me to show my face."

She lowered her gaze to her hands. They lay upon her lap, as gentle as the first flowers of spring. At length, she said, "Did he put his divorce declaration through before he left?"

"He didn't have time. But I have it on my desk and I can put it through if you want me to. However, I'd advise you against it. If you remain his wife, his share of the company will automatically become yours when he fails to return within ten years."

"You talk as though he's already left Earth."

"He has," Price said. "This morning, he shipped on one of the company freighters as an ordinary spaceman. It was the only way he could elude the troopers. I'm sorry, Fleurette."

She looked through the portscope at the distant lights. Her shoulders shook for a moment, then grew still. He wanted to put his arm around them, but did not dare. Her eyes, reflected in the portscope, met his, and she must have seen his anguish, for she said, "It's all right, Aaron *pere*. I'm not going to cry. In a moment I'll be myself again, and then I'll turn around and everything will be the way it was before."

No, *Fleurette*, he wanted to say, but didn't, *everything*

will not be the way it was before. The moving finger, having written, has moved on . . .

The three other seats in the compartment had been taken—two of them by couples from Guanlago and Fargastar and the third by a couple from Earth—and presently the moonmaid came mincing up the spiral stairway and then back down it again, crooning the countdown as she checked to see whether all the acceleration belts were buckled. She winked at Price. "Twenty-five, you lucky lover you," she crooned. "Twenty-four, twenty-three, twenty-two . . ."

Price felt sick. Did his feelings for *Fleurette* lay naked in his eyes for the whole wide world to see? It would seem that way. There was no denying that the moonmaid had seen them, and apparently his son had known they were there all along. Ronny's cutting words of the night before came back and slashed his thoughts, and he drove them into the dark corners of his mind. But they came scurrying out of the shadows the minute he turned his back, and despite all he could do to stop it the ugly scene that had spawned them began building up around him once again.

Blast-off was almost a relief. He had grown his space wings decades ago, but g-buildup was

still enough to drive everything from his mind. Fleurette was still a fledgling, and when break-free finally came the lips that usually made him think of red raspberries were only a shade less gray than her face. After the grav unit went on, he rubbed her wrists till color came back into her cheeks and until her lips turned raspberry-red again. "It's all over now," he said. "Now we can sit back and enjoy the ride."

She turned toward the portscope, gasped when she saw the stars. "They're beautiful out here, aren't they!"

He pointed. "That orange one over there is Aldebaran. That blue one's Achernar. Do you see those drops of light that look like drops of dew? They're the Pleiades . . ."

But only his eyes were on the stars. His thoughts were back on Earth.

II

THE lift had taken him to the 124th floor of the Peregrine White Building and opened its door on the first level of the luxurious quadruplex that Ronny had leased after walking out on Fleurette. He ran a gantlet of mechmaids and robutlers and let himself into his son's study and closed the door behind him. Ronny was sitting behind a

chrome-topped desk, talking into a tape-typer. If he was surprised to see Price, he did not show it. He pointed to a chair beside the desk. "Sit down, dad."

Price walked across the room, but he did not sit down. He stood before the desk and looked across its gleaming surface at his son. Despite its lack of spaceburn, the face before him bore a strong resemblance to the face he saw each morning in the mirror when he shaved. But he found it impossible to find himself in those blue and barren eyes, found it impossible to understand how people could still look at Ronny and exclaim, "You look so much like your father!"

The blue eyes held their ground, but there was a telltale quivering in the right eyelid. "I suppose you're angry with me, dad."

Price shook his head. "Not with you. With myself."

"For what? For growing old? Everybody grows old."

"And the older they grow, the more incompetent they become."

"I didn't retire you because I thought you were incompetent. You know better than that. I retired you because in another year you'll be fifty and would have had to retire anyway."

"I know," Price said. "The old have to move on to make place for the young. That's why I stepped aside two years ago and

gave you the presidency of the company. But I never thought you'd retire me from the vice presidency behind my back. I thought you'd at least take the trouble to consult me."

"I'm sorry, but—"

"It's all right—forget about it. That's not the real reason I'm here. The real reason is Fleurette."

Ronny flushed. "I'm through with Fleurette, and you know it. So if that's why you came you can leave right now."

Price leaned forward and gripped the edge of the desk with his hand. "I didn't turn *all* my stock over to you, in case you've forgotten, and I still have a certain amount of prestige. I don't know how you talked the other stockholders into voting me out today, but I'll bet I can talk them into voting you out tomorrow just as easily. And I'll do it Ronny, so help me I will, if you declare a divorce against Fleurette!"

THE residue of boyhood that remained in Ronny's eyes departed. He stood up. "Go ahead then, old man! Talk them into it if you can. The declaration's all drawn up, and whether you succeed or not I'm putting it through in the morning!"

"It's she who should divorce you!" Price said. "And if the law read the way it used to, you'd

get a divorce no other way. *You're* the adulterer—not her!"

For some time Ronny stood motionless. Then a slow trembling seemed to go through him, and he stepped back from the desk. His smile was as cold and foreboding as the ice floes of Saturn. "Am I now, old man?"

"Yes!" Price shouted. "Ten times, twenty times over. Do you think I don't know it? Do you think *she* doesn't know it? We've known it all along! But we thought you'd change. We never dreamed that associating with wantons would make you want to marry one—make it impossible for you to live with a decent girl."

"I should think you'd *want* me to declare a divorce, old man."

This time, it was Price who stepped back from the desk. "*Want* you to? That doesn't even make sense."

"Doesn't it, old man? I think it makes a lot of sense. I've got eyes, too. I've seen the way you look at her. Why old man, you've been in love with her for years. Do you remember that time we were staying at your chalet in Colorado? Do you remember how you went on one of those rare binges of yours and danced with her all one evening? Do you remember how I came out on the patio and saw the two of you standing in the moonlight? You were looking at her like a love-

sick schoolboy! If I hadn't already guessed the truth, I'd have guessed it then. Not guessed it—known it. Some father you turned out to be!"

Price felt himself sway, and he took a wider stance to keep from falling. He knew that his face was gray—gray even through the spaceburn with which the stars had darkened it . . . The stars and the years and the loneliness came back to him, and the loneliness rose up in him and cried, *Why didn't you let them go, Aaron Price? Why did you try to get them back? Why didn't you leave well enough alone and make the best of what you had left to spend?*

Ronny was speaking again. Through the years and across the distances, Price heard his words: "So you see, old man, you'd only be working against yourself if you tried to get me voted out to stop me from divorcing Fleurette. In your heart, you want me to divorce her, and you know it."

"No," Price said weakly, "it's not that way at all. I want *you* to have her. To love her the way she loves you. That's all I've ever wanted. For you to have her and to love her forever—even though I've known all along that it could never be."

Sadly, he turned away and started walking toward the door. But the accumulated slings and

arrows of the years had yet to exhaust themselves, and just before he reached the door, it opened, and brown-uniformed troopers carrying arachnid guns and wearing brassards with the letters IRS stamped on them stormed into the room.

IRS troopers were called in only when Grand Evasion was involved. Shocked, Price faced his son. "It must be a mistake, Ronny. Tell them it's a mistake!"

But it wasn't a mistake. Ronny's face said so, and his actions shouted the fact. He ran for the study window and threw the sash switch. One of the arachnid guns spat its web, and he eluded the filamentous fingers as he climbed up on the sill. Price saw then that he was wearing an anti-grav vest. That was all he saw. One of the troopers knocked him down, and when he regained his feet Ronny was gone.

III

THE Guanlagoan couple were making love. No one would have known it, though—no one except someone who had been to Guanlago.

Aaron Price had been to Guanlago. He had lived on Guanlago for more than two years.

He turned sideways on the lounge-seat, shutting off Fleurette's view. He knew that there

was no need for him to, but the protective instinct that she aroused in him was forever making him do needless and quixotic things. One way or another, he had been trying to protect her ever since Ronny had brought her home.

That had been ten years ago.

Ten years . . . It didn't seem like ten years. It seemed like yesterday.

Fleurette said, "You're awfully quiet, Aaron *pere*."

"I know. The world is too much with me, I guess—even though we've left it behind . . . Have you made any plans, Fleurette? About what you're going to do, I mean."

"No. I—I have no plans at all."

"If I put the divorce through, the annuity Ronny had to set up for you in order to get the declaration drawn up would be more than enough to take care of you. But as I said, it'll be better not to, because if you remain married to him you'll automatically acquire his share in the company in ten years' time . . . Of course, there isn't really any problem with respect to your support, because I—"

"Yes?"

The near slip-of-the-tongue made him furious with himself. Naturally there wasn't any problem! How could there be when she was going to inherit

everything he owned in a matter of a few days? "Because I can get you a good job with the company as soon as we get back to Earth," he extemporized, "and you can go right on enjoying the same standard of living you're accustomed to."

"But won't I be liable for Ronny's tax deficit? Won't they—"

Price shook his head. "I've taken the necessary steps to make up the deficit myself. They won't touch you."

"Then there wasn't really any need for him to run away! Oh Aaron, why did he?"

"Because he would have had to stand trial whether the deficit was made up or not and he'd have gotten a ten-to-fifteen year sentence." Price sighed. "But he'd have run away anyway. It was in the books for him to run away. He could no more have stopped running away than the sun could stop coming up in the morning."

"I—I don't understand."

"IT'S funny," Price went on, "how a person can know something is going to happen—that it's bound to happen—and still manage to go on pretending that it won't. How he can convince himself so completely that he's actually surprised when it does happen. That was the way it was with me. I knew that when the day came Ronny would leave and

that there would be a bona fide reason for his doing so. And I knew that there would be nothing I could do to stop him. I even knew approximately what day he would leave, and yet I was able to go on living as though that day would never come to pass. I didn't even recognize it when it came. I didn't want to recognize it, you see—and then, too, there was always the possibility that the pattern might change. As though it could! In a way, it was like your marriage, Fleurette. I knew that it wasn't working out, but I wouldn't recognize the fact. I refused to. And when I heard that Ronny was declaring a divorce, I was shocked!"

She turned away, gazed through the portscope at the slow drifting of the stars. "I was, too," she said. "I wouldn't face the truth either. Not even when he left me."

Impulsively, Price said. "You shouldn't have loved him so much. He isn't worth it. He isn't fit to buckle your shoes!"

She whirled so quickly that particles of starlight lingered in her eyes. "Don't say that, Aaron *pere*—don't ever dare say it again! He's your son, and I love him. I've always loved him and I always will!"

Helplessness gripped him, made him want to cry out in unendurable pain. Miserably, he

looked beyond Fleurette's lovely head to where the Pleiades lay upon the face of space like fresh-shed tears. "All right," he said at last, "I'll never say it again."

After that, they were silent for a long time. Now and then, the ship creaked as it sped on its lunar trajectory. The couple from Earth gave birth to sporadic giggles, and a sad sweet susurrus came from the couple from Fargastar. The Gunla-goans were still.

At length, Price said, "Soon, we'll see the moon."

It edged slowly into sight, half in darkness, half in light. At this distance, the craters and the "seas" had a pale gold cast, but before long they would take on a tinge of silver. Fleurette gasped with delight, and leaned closer to the portscope, and he saw the reflection of her face in the glass. The eyes were wide now, like a child's, and her sense of wonder had brought an added fullness to her cheeks. It was the same face he had seen the night his son had brought her home all those wary years ago.

"Over there," he said, pointing, "you'll see the Leibnitz Mountains. They're just beyond the twilight belt. The Earthlight Inn stands at their feet."

"Where? I can see the Mountains, but I can't see the Inn."

He laughed. "Of course you can't, *jeune fille*. We're much too

far away. But when we orbit in you'll be able to if you look real hard. Although it won't really be the Inn you'll see, but the gleam of Earthlight on its dome. The pleasure-dome, it's called."

HER face was so close to the portscope now that her nose was pressed against the glass. *Dad*, a voice cried in his mind. *Dad, dad!*

"A pleasure-dome," she said. "Why, it's a little like *Kubla Khan*." Suddenly, she turned and faced him. "'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure-dome decree,'" she recited all in a rush, "'where Alph, the sacred river, ran through caverns measureless to man down to a sunless sea!'"

Her gray eyes were enormous, her lips more than ever reminiscent of the wild raspberries he had gathered as a boy. *Dad, dad!* the voice cried again. *Wait'll you see, dad—wait'll you see!* "I'm afraid there aren't any rivers on the moon," he said. "Not even subterranean ones."

"Well I don't care!" She turned back toward the portscope. "Rivers or not, the moon puts Xanadu to shame!"

Dad! Dad!

"I've heard it said," he went on desperately, "that in twelve years' time the Inn has paid for itself twelve times over. But I'm inclined to doubt it."

Dad Dad! Wait'll you see—
He gave up then, and let the moment come through.

* * *

"—my wife! Wait'll you see her, dad!"

Price Past rotated his fireside chair and got to his feet. The library door had opened, and Ronny was standing on the threshold. "Wait'll you see her, dad!"

Wife? . . . The word cartwheeled and somersaulted about his mind, eluding his bewildered attempts to capture it. He was sure it wasn't the right word anyway. It *couldn't* be. Why, the boy was only nineteen! He had not even finished college yet. And what was he doing *home* from college? Surely, he hadn't gone out and—and—

A girl stepped into the room.

She had dark-brown hair. She was tall and slender. She had gray eyes and a round full face. The girlish dress she was wearing began below her shoulders, and the firelight had already fallen in love with her smooth clear skin. Meadow flowers grew around her, and her mouth had the redness of the wild raspberries that grew in the fields of his youth. Spring resided in the dew-brightness of her eyes; her cheeks held the hue of frost-kissed leaves. Spring, summer, fall and finally winter in the snow-whiteness of her hands.

"This is Fleurette, dad. She's an exchange student from New France, and we met at school. Fleurette, this is my father."

She came like a summer wind across the room and kissed him, and he knew the fields once again; the fields and the woods and the warm summer sun, and the red and succulent berries that had stained his lips and filled his mouth with sweetness. "Aaron *pere*," she said, looking up into his eyes. "I will call you that—okay?"

He must have nodded, for she went on, "And Aaron Junior—I will call him Aaron *fils*. That way, there will never be confusion in the house of Price."

"But dad calls me Ronny for that very same reason," Ronny objected. "You'll be creating the very confusion you're trying to eliminate."

She faced him. "And I will also call you Ronny—when I get to know you better. But you—" and she turned back to Price—"I will always call Aaron *pere*."

"Why?" Price asked.

"Because I am French and like people to know it, and when I learn to speak your language better they will forget unless I remind them. It will be difficult to call you *pere*, though. You seem so young."

"To someone as young as you, I should seem as old as Methuselah."

"Methuselah indeed! With such brisk blue eyes and such dark-gold tan, you could never seem old to anyone!"

Ronny said, "That's spaceburn. Dad used to be a spacer, and spaceburn never fades."

The gray eyes grew large. "You have been all the way up to the stars? To the Other Planets?"

Price nodded. "To Fargastar and Guanlago. And oh yes—to Alphaghagar, too. But aren't we straying too far afield from the subject on hand?" He looked at Ronny. "Why didn't you let me know you were getting married?"

"We made up our minds in a hurry. And I guess we were afraid somebody would try to stop us."

"Fleurette's parents?"

"She hasn't any. She's an orphan . . . I guess it was you we were afraid of."

"You had good reason to be. You still have. I can get the marriage annulled in two hours' time."

Fleurette stepped close to him and gazed up into his face. "But you would not dare do such a disastrous thing, Aaron *pere*! I am the girl for him, and you know it. Look into my eyes and tell me that I am not."

He didn't need to look. All he needed to do was to listen to his heart. He went over to the liquor

cabinet and got a bottle of brandy. He poured three glasses, handed one to his son and one to his daughter-in-law. He raised his own. "To you, *jeune fille*," he said to Fleurette. "To you, Ronny," he said to his son. "Many happy returns of the day."

IV

THE HoneyEarth Express came down on an Earthbeam and settled to rest on the great plain that spread out from the ragged foothills of the Leibnitz Mountains.

In the immediate foreground, the huge dome of the Earthlight Inn contrasted jarringly with the awry rock-formations of the foothills. Fronting the Inn proper were three smaller domes. The foremost was the landing-area dome, and from it a long enclosed ramp led to the two others, one of which housed the air-locks and the other of which housed the power-room. From the air-locks a larger enclosed ramp led to the ground floor of the Inn.

Earth was almost at the full, and her rich light had painted domes and plain and foothills in pale and dream-like grays. The stars lay like twinkling drops of morning dew on the black up-rising fields of space. Moments

after the ship landed, a big bus-cat came out of the landing-area dome, rolled across the intervening distance, and connected itself to the locks with a collapsible gang-tube. The locks opened then, and the HoneyEarthers filed down the tube and into the cat, and the cat recollapsed the tube and rolled back to the dome. Thence, it rolled up the ramp to the air-locks, passed through them, and discharged its passengers.

The lobby extended throughout the entire ground floor of the Inn, and it was as varied as it was huge. There were souvenir stands where you could buy love charms that came from all over the civilized sector of the galaxy. There was a gleaming automat where you could dial any dish under the seventeen suns. There was a small 3DT theatre where you attend a continuous performance of the latest histori-hit play, *Richard and Elizabeth*. There was a chrome-topped autobar at which you could sit on contour stools and drink from diapason steins that sang songs to suit your every mood. There was an electronic bowling alley where you could bowl 300 simply by regulating a dial. And lastly there was the long, altar-like counter where you signed your name in the famous HoneyEarth book and received your golden key.

PRICE proceeded directly to the counter, Fleurette walking at his side. The clerk was a mech-man, but the smile he wore seemed sincere enough, and the hospitality that radiated from his synthi-face was all the more pleasant for its tangibility. He accepted Price's money with a polite bow, opened the big register, and Price wrote *Mr. and Mrs. Aaron Price, Earth* on the artificially yellowed page. He was in full command of himself now, and when the clerk handed him the gold-plated key that opened the door that connected his room to Fleurette's and that was supposed to remain in his possession during the HoneyEarth and to be retained by her as a keepsake afterward, he accepted it with the precise degree of tremulousness that Terran society—and mech-men, who were geared to the Terran *Zeitgeist* and who were triggered to sound an alarm at the first sign of atypical behavior—expected in a new Terran husband on his HoneyEarth night.

In the lift that carried them aloft to the HoneyEarth rooms, he handed the key to Fleurette. She accepted it without a word and dropped it into her purse. As they were stepping from the lift into the fifth-floor corridor, a soft voice spoke to them from a hidden speaker. "There's to be

entertainment in the Earthlight Room half an hour from now, you Two," it said. "The management cordially invites you to be there."

"We *are* going to be there, aren't we?" Price asked.

"Of course, Aaron *pere*. But first I must freshen up."

Their HoneyEarth Nest—the Inn advertisements never referred to the highly publicized double rooms by any other term—had all the conveniences of home, and then some. At least his half of it did—he didn't enter hers. There were hidden lights that adapted the hue and the intensity of their radiance to your mood. There was a chair to sit on, a chair to recline on, and a chair that turned into a bed. There was a round table that served you coffee and sandwiches and salads. There was a square table that functioned as a checkerboard, a chessboard, a parchesi board, and a ouija board. There was a small 3DT screen on which you could view authentic portrayals of the meetings of David and Bathsheba, Solomon and Sheba, Paris and Helen, Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, Launcelot and Guinevere, Tristram and Isolde, Dante and Beatrice, Stendhal and Mathilde, Robert and Elizabeth, Richard and Elizabeth, and Entharkane and Guilla. There was a small bar with two flower-like

stools in front of it, one of them labeled HERS, the other labeled HIS. And there was an adjoining bath where precious water from the rings fell like summer rain.

Showering, Price thought of space and stars and Fleurette. He dreaded the ordeal that lay before him, and yet in a way he looked forward to it. He deserved to suffer for what he had done. He wanted to suffer. But the point was, why should Fleurette have to suffer also?

Hadn't she suffered enough?

The memory of Ronny's philandering made him wince. But it wasn't the boy's philandering that had awakened his hatred. It was the first bruise he had seen on Fleurette's gentle face.

RONNY had laughed when he had accused him. Laughed and lied. And Price had believed him. At first. And then, months later, he had seen the second bruise. When Ronny had laughed and lied again, Price had nearly killed him. After that, he had seen no more bruises—

Until tonight.

Probably she had tried to stop Ronny from walking out on her. That would have provided him with enough provocation to strike her. Lord knew, he would not have needed very much.

On the surface, it didn't make

sense. At first, Ronny had been happy with his lovely young wife. They had finished college together, and Price had set them up in a swank triplex and taken the boy into the company. He expected to find in him the same ambition he had found in himself, and he found it, too; but unlike his own ambition, Ronny's wasn't tempered by integrity or common decency. It wasn't tempered by anything at all. And the same could be said for his other natural inclinations. As soon as he hit his stride, he began to lie, to cheat; to chase. And he had been lying and cheating and chasing ever since.

Underneath the surface, however, Ronny's conduct made a lot of sense. He had had a silver spoon thrust into his mouth when he was too old for silver spoons. Human as well as concrete structures require foundations, and Ronny had had none. He had had to build on sand, and inevitably his house had gone awry and come tumbling down around him.

Shaving, Price regarded the reflection of his spaceburned face. "Why didn't you leave the years alone?" he said aloud. "All men lose their youths at one time and in one way or another. Wise men forget about the loss—only fools try to redeem it."

But perhaps he couldn't have left the years alone even if he

had wanted to. Perhaps, in the final analysis, man's free will was a part of the price he had had to pay for the stars.

It was after 0200 hours when they went down to the Earthlight Room. Fleurette gasped when they stepped out of the lift. Even Price was impressed.

The "room" took up one third of the dome's interior. The entire rear wall was given over to tiers of balconies, which were reached by tendril-like steel stairways. Opposite the balconies, a huge view-window looked out upon the plain and the ragged Leibnitz foothills, and framed in the window—centered in it, almost—was Earth. Blue-green and beautiful, clad in a lacy negligee of clouds, she rained down her pale and dreamlike radiance, and the soft gray light lay upon the moonscape and filled the room, giving the effect of a three-dimensional painting done in chiaroscuro.

The floor was on three levels. The lowest level constituted the dance floor. Tables ringed it, and it was separated from the intermediate level by a low wall. On the intermediate level, tables stood along the base of the view-window, and this arrangement was repeated on the third level. Most of the tables were occupied, some by the couples, both Terran and alien, who had arrived on the

last Express, and others by first and second HoneyEarthers who had come in earlier. A quartet of spotlights on the lofty ceiling of the dome created a little lake of brightness in the center of the dance floor, and in the brightness an itinerant ballet troupe was performing an ultra modern version of Stravinski's *Le Sacre du Printemps*.

Price chose a table on the third level that was close enough to the dance floor to afford a good view of the performance and far enough away from the nearest loud speaker to keep the taped music deep in the background. They ordered starwine when the mech-waiter came, and after it arrived in iridescent glasses they sipped it looking into each others' eyes. By Earthlight, Fleurette was even lovelier than she had been on that long-ago night in the light of the Colorado moon. Her décolleté gown left her shoulders bare, affording an ideal playground for Earthbeams, and chiaroscuro heightened, even while it softened, the poignant beauty of her face. "I never told you before," he said, "and perhaps I shouldn't be telling you now. But when Ronny brought you home and said you were his wife, I think I was as happy about it as he was."

"I know," she said. "I knew the minute I kissed you."

What else did she know?



G.L.F. —

Price wondered. He had betrayed his feelings to Ronny. Had he betrayed them to her, too? He did not think he had. "Did Ronny ever tell you how I found him?" he asked.

She nodded. "Lots of times. When we were first married, it was all he used to talk about. About how brave you were. About—about how you'd lost your hand saving his life. Why did you adopt him, Aaron *pere*?"

"Because I loved him." Once, the admission would have embarrassed Price, but he was less sensitive to the shortcomings of the human race than he used to be, and to a considerable extent he had resigned himself to being a member of it—and part and parcel of its weaknesses—some time ago. "I loved him and I wanted to do everything I could for him. And he was so helpless. He was like a baby, almost. No memory—no identification even. He'd left his I.D. tags on the ship. He said there wasn't a ship, but I knew better. The minute I saw him, I wanted him to have everything I'd always wanted and never had the chance to get. And so I set about trying to destroy him."

"Through love?"

"No. Through selfishness. I wanted to live through him. People always act out of selfishness—don't you know that by this time, *jeune fille*?"

"Don't try to pass yourself off

as an egotistic hedonist on me, Aaron *pere*! I know better. An egotistic hedonist wouldn't sacrifice his hand to save someone else's life."

"Of course he wouldn't. But in a way that's beside the point. I didn't sacrifice my hand—I lost it accidentally. And if I'd known I was going to lose it, I'd probably have let the kid stay where he was."

"I don't believe that for one minute, Aaron *pere*."

Price didn't believe it for one minute either. "The only way I could get him off the floe," he went on, "was by sinking the anchor and going down the line. He was scared to death, poor kid—so scared he couldn't move. He had good cause to be, with those god-awful floes drifting all around him, with nothing but an ice-hook and a pair of knee-crampons to keep him from going adrift himself. I knew I had to get to him and get to him fast, before he panicked again . . ."

V

SATURN'S diamond-bright rings, "so various, so beautiful, so new" when viewed from afar, had "really neither joy, nor love, nor light" when viewed at close range. "Dirty snowballs" were what the floe-men called them, and basically that was all they were—agglomerations of

ice and snow and dirt, some the size of mountains and some the size of hills and some the size of rocks, orbiting a world that was even less hospitable than they were. And because they were ice and snow and dirt, they were more valuable to Earth than diamonds would have been. The dirt could be discounted, but the snow and ice meant water—fresh water to supplement the supply that Earth, at tremendous expense, processed from her seas to quench the thirst of her billions of people and to irrigate her dehydrated lands.

Floe freighters were leviathans. They had to be, because the demand for their cargo was so great that it had to be transported in tremendous quantities. They never touched down on the face of Earth—they couldn't. They were built in space, and in space they remained; and when they returned from the rings they rendezvoused with ground-to-space tankers that sucked them dry, and then they went back to the rings for another payload. And the payload was always there, for to all intents and purposes the rings were inexhaustible.

To obtain a payload, all a freighter need to do was to go into orbit on the fringe of the rings, match its velocity with that of the outermost floes, and help itself. Nevertheless, there

was danger involved. Jet propulsion was efficient enough for spaceships but not for individual spacemen, and when a floe was grapneled men had to crawl across the cables to its surface and move about by means of ice-hooks and knee-crampons while stringing the reinforcing lines. And sometimes ice-hooks broke free and sometimes knee-crampons didn't dig deeply enough, and then the grapnelman became a helpless piece of living flotsam, and a helpless piece of living flotsam he remained until his companions threw him a line. That was what had happened to the kid, only in the kid's case his companions hadn't thrown him a line. He had panicked and kicked himself into the rings before they missed him, and they had given him up for lost and the floe freighter had moved on to another lode. In the meantime, he had managed to sink his ice-hook into another floe and to dig in with his crampons. It was here that Price found him.

PPRICE wasn't on a freighter. He was piloting a floe-charter. A floe charter was a small ship used by the waterlanes companies, his own included, to spot and catalogue good ring lodes—i.e., areas where the majority of the floes contained a minimum amount of dirt and a maximum amount of ice and snow. Dirt

was dross, and took up valuable space in the vats, and experience had taught the waterlanes companies that the expense of charting a ring region before sending in a freighter was negligible when compared to the expense of hauling home some ten or twenty tons of worthless clay.

The floe that the kid was clinging to was a relatively small one. It was located a good eighth of a mile within the periphery, and this made getting to him a problem in its own right. But Price was determined as he had never been determined before, and after a nerve-racking hour of changing his speed and alternating this trajectory, he succeeded in coming within thirty feet of his objective and in matching his velocity with the floe's. The next problem was to transfer the kid from the floe to the ship.

The kid had seen the ship by this time, and was staring over his shoulder at it with glazed eyes that even through his visor betrayed the space-fugue that had overtaken him. Immediately, Price began the ticklish task of sinking the anchor as close to him as possible without hitting him. He was so afraid of accidentally killing the kid that it took him nine shots to get a successful bite. He had suited himself beforehand and had attached a ten-foot life-line to his belt, so he was all set to go.

Stepping into the decompression compartment, he closed the inner locks and released the air valve. When the outer locks automatically opened with the final out-rush of air, he reached down and grasped the anchor-line at the point where it emerged from the hull and began pulling himself hand over hand toward the floe.

Reaching the surface, he tied the end of the life-line to the ring of the anchor; then he removed his ice-hook from his belt, took a bite with it, and began cramponing and hooking his way across the brief expanse of ice and snow and dirt that separated him from the kid. All the while, the kid's eyes clung to him as though seeking by the power of their gaze alone to keep him from "falling" from the floe. And maybe it was the tenacious gaze that did the trick—who could say? It had been years since Price had used an ice-hook or worn a pair of knee-crampons. In any event, he reached the kid's side without incident, and success seemed assured. Working with one hand, he fastened his belt to the kid's; then he signaled to the kid to let go of his ice-hook and to free his crampons. He had to signal three times before the kid obeyed. After that, Price let go of his own ice-hook, freed his own crampons, and, with the kid hanging on for dear

life, pulled himself back to the anchor, untied the life-line, and started back "up" the anchor-line toward the floe-charter.

His first intimation that all was not as it should be came with the realization that the anchor line had gone taut. Since it was a good forty feet in length and since the distance from the floe to the ship was less than thirty, one of two conclusions had to be drawn. Either the line had shrunk or the distance had increased. As much as he wanted to, Price couldn't bring himself to believe that the first eventuality was the case, so he found himself saddled with the second. He saw the mountainous floe bearing down on the ship then, and understood what had happened. The nine recoils of the anchor-gun had disturbed the ship's orbit just enough to cause the floe-charter to drift into the path of the nearest floe.

Ordinarily, this wouldn't have been a cause for alarm. The orbital velocity of the floes varied of course, diminishing toward the inner edge of the rings and increasing toward the outer edge, but in both cases the variation was cancelled out by the difference in distance traveled. The floe in question, however, was what floe-men called a "renew-gade". Its velocity was in the process of building up, and eventually it would build up to the

point where the floe would either escape from the rings or break up in the attempt. At the moment, its velocity was only slightly in excess of its neighbors and the floe-charter, but the difference was enough to make a collision inevitable.

It wasn't going to be a head-on collision, though. Price saw that right away. Nor was it going to be a violent collision. The floe was going to nudge the ship in passing—that was all—and probably no great damage would be done. But unfortunately the point of contact was going to be in the region of the locks, and when it occurred the decompression compartment would fill with ice and snow and dirt, and he and the kid would be left out in the cold—unless he could gain the compartment in time to close the locks.

He doubled his efforts. Tripled them. But his movements were hampered by the kid, who, eyes shut tight against further exposure to the vicious quirks of reality, was clinging to him like a frightened girl. Even so, he managed to beat the floe to the locks, and to pull himself and the kid into the compartment before "rendezvous" took place. He grabbed the lever that controlled the locks, threw it just as the gray cliff of the floe made contact. The ship shuddered, and snow and ice and dirt began

spilling into the compartment. He thrust the kid behind him and shielded him with his body; then, instinctively he stretched out his arms and tried to push back the snow and the ice and the dirt. He didn't even know it when the locks came together on his right hand. He didn't know it till, realizing that the snow and the ice and the dirt were no longer piling up around him, he stepped back and saw the blood geysering from his right wrist. Even as he looked, the blood froze and the geysering stopped; and then the whole cosmos wheeled, and he was turning, twisting . . . falling.

VI

HIS hand was throbbing again—throbbing as though the intervening fourteen years had never been. Without thinking, he looked down at it, saw the Earthlit synthi-linen tablecloth showing through the nonexistent flesh and bones. Years ago, he had been fitted with an artificial hand, but he had never been able to bring himself to use it—why, he did not wholly understand. Perhaps it was because he wanted to punish himself, wanted the evidence of his weakness to be apparent to the whole world.

When he raised his eyes, Fleurette's gentle gaze was on his face. "But how did you sur-

vive, Aaron *pere*? All alone up there among the stars? Ronny never told me about that part. How did you get out of the rings? How did you get back to Earth?"

"We wouldn't have if it hadn't been for him. In the strict sense of the word, he had no memory; but there are some things—language for one—that a person suffering from space-fugue remembers without actual recourse to the past. Ronny remembered how to operate the controls of a decompression compartment, so he was able to get me into the ship. My space-suit was a self-sealing one, and it had sealed itself around my right arm the moment the sleeve was severed along with my hand—otherwise, of course, his efforts would have been wasted. But as it was, I came to long enough to tell him what to do next—and, just as important, what not to do. We stayed right there in the floe belt till I got some of my strength back; then, with me instructing him, he piloted the floe-charter out of the rings and headed it back toward Earth . . . It was during the trip, I guess, that I started thinking of him as my son and decided to adopt him. From the moment he took his helmet off and I got a good look at his face, I loved him. I may have loved him even before that, for all I know. I was lonely, for

one thing. Over the years, the loneliness of the long runs builds up in you, and afterward you're never completely free from it. And for another thing, I was only human . . . Now there's an expression for you. Because we *are* human, we set ourselves on a pedestal and look down our noble noses on all other living creatures and use them according to the whims of our appetities and our economy. And then the minute one of our innumerable weaknesses catches up to us we excuse ourselves by saying that we're *only* human!"

"But it's true, Aaron *pere*—we *are* only human. If we weren't, we wouldn't be capable of such a monstrous self-deception. But I don't see how it applies in your case."

Silent, he looked down into his glass. It was empty. As empty as his life. But the glass, at least, could be refilled. "Waiter," he said into the table-com, and the mechman brought more wine.

PRICE raised his glass and drank. He looked into Fleur-ette's gray eyes. "Do you remember when you and Ronny were staying at my chalet in Colorado?" he asked. "Do you remember when you and I stepped out on the patio to look at the mountains in the moonlight?"

"Yes," she said, "I remember."

"I tried to kiss you, didn't I?"

She shook her head. "No, Aaron. You didn't try—you did."

Dismayed, he said, "I hoped you'd slapped my face!"

"Slap your face indeed! Why, I wouldn't have dreamed of doing such a thing. It was a nice kiss, and it came from your heart. Besides—"

"Yes?" he said.

"Never mind. You wouldn't understand." She lowered her gaze to the table, then returned it to his face. "Tell me about the stars, Aaron *pere*. You've always said they were your undoing, but you've never once said why."

He tried to see into her eyes, beyond the quiet veils that hid the springtime hills and the autumn nights and the long hot summer days. But the vista was denied him. "Where shall I begin?"

"At the beginning, naturally. You mentioned one time that you were impressed by the captain of a free-lance floe freighter and that after you escaped you didn't return to Earth for years. That was the beginning, wasn't it?—when you escaped."

Price sighed. "In a way," he said. The taped music raised its voice, and two of the dancers executed *grand jetés*, rising high above the floor in the tenuous lunar gravity. The Earthlight intensified, and the blues and greens of Earth herself took on deeper hues. "I was only thirty

at the time of my escape," he went on. "Life on board a pirate ship—that's what a free-lance floer amounts to, you know—had made me bold, and I thought that I could do anything. At any rate, I was willing to try. So I decided to become a deep-spacer, and shipped to Mars. That's where most of the Solar starports are. Escape velocity's a drop in the bucket on Mars, and blast-off comes in the large economy-sized package. I knew that if I wanted a berth on one of the trans-C starships, Mars was the place to get it . . ."

THE first berth he had obtained was on the freighter *Bloemfontein*. She was Dutch and she was dirty, but on her he found his spacelegs, and, by skillfully questioning certain members of her crew, he was able to devise a means of circumventing the space-time equalization schedule. Her destination was Alphaghagar, and when she reached it he obtained his release by filing a land claim and applying for Alphaghagar naturalization papers. Then, when she left on the equalization trip back to Earth, he cancelled the land claim and withdrew the naturalization application and signed up on the Japanese freighter *Kiyomi*, which was in stopover at the Alphaghagar starport on its way to far Guanlago.

On Guanlago, he obtained his release from the *Kiyomi* by filing another land claim and applying for Guanlago naturalization papers. This time, he retained the land claim and let the application go through, and after the *Kiyomi* departed he settled down ostensibly to wait out the three years that were required by Guanlagoan law for an alien to become a Guanlagoan citizen, but actually to wait out the two years and one week that would elapse before the Konfarway-Guanlago-Fargastar-Alphaghagar-Mars Express came through on its next run. Those two years, when added to the two he had lost already and the one he would lose on the trip back, brought the total to five, but there was nothing he could do about them, and anyway, five years was a small enough price to pay for fourteen.

While waiting, he made good use of his time. Thanks to the extensive book-tape library that the *Kiyomi* had contained, he was *au courant* by this time, and thanks to the same source, he was fully acquainted with the way of life of the people among whom he had taken up residence. In addition, he turned out to be a natural businessman. The Guanlagoans were a lovely gentle people among whom cleanliness was a fetish, but they lived in shabby little huts that looked like pigsties. It was taken for granted by the

Terrans who had already gone into business on the planet that the reason they lived in such dwellings was that they liked to. But instinctively Price knew better. The Guanlagoans only *thought* they liked to live in pigsties, and the reason they thought so was that no one had ever taken the trouble to tempt them with superior dwellings. It was high time someone did.

He invested part of the accumulated wages of his two runs in the necessary materials and built a streamlined version of a typical Guanlagoan dwelling on the edge of his land claim where every Guanlagoan for miles around could see it. When they flocked around it like flies, he told them that they too could live in a streamlined pigsty if they wanted to, and explained to them how they could do so without financially inconveniencing themselves. They went for the idea, and Price headed for the nearest Terran bank to obtain the necessary backing. He got it, subdivided his claim, and began building in earnest. In six Guanlagoan years (480 Earth days), he was a rich man.

He expanded his activities, buying more land, and in three more Guanlagoan years he tripled his fortune. By then, the time had come for him to leave. Arranging passage on the Konfarway-Guanlago-Fargastar-Al-

phaghagar-Mars Express had entailed pulling a good many strings and arranging re-entry to Earth after he got to Mars had entailed pulling a good many more, and the overall cost of the strings had put a sizable nick in his fortune; but there had still been enough of it left to enable him to start a new waterlanes company. On his first official trip to the rings, he had rescued Ronny. Finding him had been easy. He had simply followed the *Gany-mede* at a discreet distance and moved in afterward. Returning to Earth, he had made profitable use of the experience he had acquired on the free-lance floor, and by applying futuristic techniques to his waterlanes operations he had soon left his competitors far behind him.

VII

A GAIN, two of the dancers executed lofty *grand jetés*. This time, Fleurette did not turn her head to look. "What is it that you're trying to tell me, Aaron Price?"

Silent, Price thought of the stars. Of the red stars and the blue stars and the green; of the Sol-type yellows that had given birth to planets similar to the Earth and had made it possible for intelligent life to develop in a variety of ways.

But by far the most unique

way it had developed of all was on the Earth.

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! . . . In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! . . . The paragon of animals! . . .

The paragon of fools! . . .

But he was being unfair. He was using himself for a criterion, and he was not an ordinary man. Ordinary men knew enough to leave their youths alone, to refrain from using the stars as stepping stones into the past—

Yes, but ordinary men knew *their* yesterdays. And he hadn't known his.

His had been a closed book—a book he had been unable to open without the stars.

And so he had used the stars and opened it. And now he wanted to close it because he could no longer bear what was written on the pages. And the only way he could close it was to die.

And so he was going to die. With his own hands—come Earth; come tomorrow or the next day—he was going to close the book.

"What is it, Aaron Price? What is it that you're trying to say?"

He met her eyes, and knew their gentle grayness. "Space-fugue," he said. "That's what I'm trying to say. It's not like ordinary fugue. It endures for

years, and only spacefright can bring it on and only spacefright can drive it away. And the years in between are lost. When those years are your best years, you hate to lose them. And if you're like me, you try to get them back."

HE took a deep breath, held it for a moment before setting it free. His eyes found, and focused on, his empty glass. "In a few days," he said, "the floe freighter Ronny shipped on will begin orbiting the rings. I don't know exactly how it will happen, but probably it will be something like this: The freighter will grapple a floe and Ronny will go out with the grapple crew and help string the reinforcing lines. He'll be as green at the job as he was before, and in addition he'll be completely out of practice. Somehow, he'll lose contact both with the floe and with the other grapplers, and he'll become stranded on another floe and the freighter will give him up for lost and move on. Then, for the second time, spacefright will hit him, and the fourteen-year space-fuge period will be broken. And when he comes out of it, he'll instinctively think that the floe he's clinging to is the same one he was clinging to before the space-fuge period began. But it won't be."

"Look at me, Aaron Price."

"In a few hours," Price went on, "a free-lance floer will spot him, take him on board, and impress him. He'll have no memory of me and no memory of you. He'll remember absolutely nothing about the years that intervened between the moment spacefright cancelled out the first fifteen years of his life and the moment spacefright brought them back. To him it will seem as though only minutes have passed since the first freighter—the *Ganymede*—left him to die, and he'll take it for granted that he's still fifteen years old—till he sees his face in a mirror and asks someone the date. He'll know then that he's twenty-nine."

"Why don't you look at me, Aaron Price?"

His eyes did not leave his empty glass. "I had to tell you this, *jeune fille*. I didn't want to, but it would have been unfair to you if I hadn't. But no one else knows, and there's no reason why anyone ever should. In ten years time, Ronny's share in the company will go to you, and I've made arrangements for you to inherit mine. That, at least, is as it should be."

For a while he was silent, and when he spoke again some of the anguish of Oedipus was in his voice. "Men should leave time alone. When they play with time they burn their fingers and sometimes they burn their lives. A

space-fugue victim can never really relive his lost years. He enters them like a stranger, and when he interferes with them, as he invariably must, he affects their pattern and destroys himself. He can only put new ironies into old bottles and cry out, 'Absalom, my son, myself!' And if his Absalom had a wife, he can only go to her and say, 'All the sin Absalom's face is black with, my face is black with too.'"

When he looked at her, she was crying. Around them, the Earthlight fell like gray rain, and the rain became his years. It accumulated on his shoulders and weighed them down. It made September patterns on his aging spaceburned face and added streaks of grayness to his hair. He could not see the patterns and the streaks, but he knew that they were there. And all the while, Fleurette seemed more than ever like a little girl.

He turned his eyes away.

Out of the corners of them he saw her open her purse, withdraw a small object, and lay it on the table. Still crying, she stood up, and walked toward the lifts that led to the HoneyEarth rooms.

He stared at the object, and a tightness seized him, and he had to look away. He looked out over the moonscape—over the Earthlit foothills, over the Earthlit plain. He saw the fields then, and the great green hill rising into the sky. He felt the summer sun upon his back. A summer wind sprang up and caressed his spaceburned face.

Kneeling, he began gathering the red red berries. He tasted them, and they were sweet—sweet with the sweetness of her lips. Still not quite believing, he came back from the fields, back from tomorrow, and looked at the object again. No, his eyes had not deceived him.

It was a golden key.

THE END

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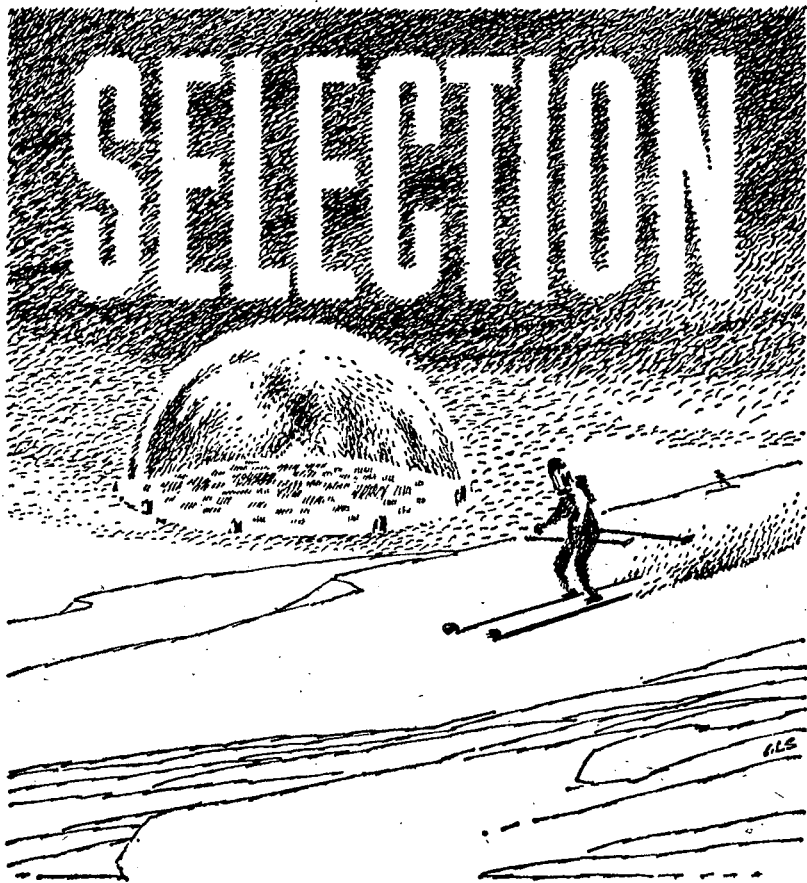
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By **URSULA K. LE GUIN**

Illustrated by **SCHELLING**

"It's outrageous," said the red-haired young woman. "It's an insult. It's a mistake. I am not going to marry Harry Chang-Olivier!"

"Have you any reasons for this decision that can be phrased in a form acceptable to the Analyzer?" inquired Mr Gosseyn-Ho in a meek, buzzing voice, a feeble echo of the mighty toneless racket of his computers.

The young woman snarled like a panther. Gosseyn-Ho did not like the way she kept her hands locked as if to prevent herself from damaging something. "No," she said pantherishly, "I don't. I have worked with Chang-Olivier for several months, and know him. I wish to have another combination selected, Mr Gosseyn-Ho!"

The Ho! came out rather loud, and he jumped. Rearranging the little black hat on his bald head, he murmured, "But Miss Ekstrom-Ngungu, that is not possible."

"Not possible?"

"No. As you know, an enormous number of relevant data are used in these particular calculations. Spouse Selection is a Socio-Behavioral Operation Pattern area of typically high sensitivity. Let me remind you of what the Manual of Sociometrics says: 'Few social factors are more important for such colonies than the union of spouses se-

lected for optimum offspring probability as well as maximum contentment-efficiency level. When in such colonies a young person submits his name for Spouse Selection, all data on that person is activated: his entire genetic record and all information collected since birth. All these data are collated rigorously with the relevant data concerning all submitted items in the proper age-range of the opposite sex.' You may appreciate the magnitude of the operation, Miss Ekstrom-Ngungu, when I tell you that I've seen a Mark XIV take between eighteen and twenty-three minutes to perform it! Well, you can see that the choice gets narrowed down pretty fast, and often the number of optimum combinations issued for any one item is between one and three. And of course only optimum combinations are accepted here on Third. In your case, only one was issued."

She stared a while, quieted, even a little glassy-eyed, as people often were after listening to the Computometrist talk. At last she asked (she was after all a mere biologist, unaccustomed to the exact terminology used by Sociometricians)—"You mean, he's the only man on this planet that I can marry?"

"The only acceptable combination issued for you," Gosseyn-Ho confirmed.

After a silence she said, "And if I withdraw . . ." But her voice trailed away, and she blushed. The colonists of Beta Cygni III hated to admit failure at anything they undertook, and would do almost anything to avoid failure; they were proud people, obstinate people. Careful selection and four generations of education had ensured their pride and obstinacy. For no other qualities would have kept human beings thriving in the pallid, insidious wastes of Third.

"Oh yes indeed, you can withdraw your application; after that I expect you would wish to request to return to your parents in Dome Iota? After all, you submitted your name as Eligible yourself."

The Computometrist admired her blush. Red hair, and a copper skin suffused with red: a striking effect. Had there ever been red panthers?

"But I thought your think-tanks would find somebody half-way compatible!" she raged, now almost in tears. She did not cry, but she did overstep the code which forbade an unmarried girl to admit any strong emotion at all concerning a young man. "I HATE that man!" she shouted.

"A high degree of personality-compatibility obtains among all of us here on Third. The compatibility index for the overall popu-

lation is required to run 89.6 at least, and is vigilantly maintained at that level or above by education and stock-selection. Negative interpersonal emotion in such a population usually represents concealed feelings of inadequacy or fear.—In any case, Miss Ekstrom-Ngungu, all I can really say is, take it or leave it, eh?" He gave his little nod, accompanied by a little smile.

"Oh," said the girl, "Oh—oh—oh damn your Analyzers and Sociometrics and all your tin brains here! What you and your big tin machines don't have is the least knowledge of elementary human biology!" And, sparks flying from her red hair, she was gone.

Mr. Gosseyn-Ho rearranged his little black hat and murmured to her empty chair, "Oh, I think we have . . ."

HARRY CHANG-OLIVIER was a tall, black-haired fellow. In the dreary light of day on Third his face glowed almost golden, vivid as a view of Earth's yellow sun on the visitapes. He had lungs like atmospheric pumps, and a ringing tenor voice. On a milder world he might have sung the heroes in dodecacophonic Superoperas, and been a famous artist; here in Dome-Town Kappa he was an organic chemist. Day after day he measured zymase output in

the growing tanks, unregretfully. He was a cheerful man. Cheerfulness was another quality natured and nurtured by the Sociometric Plan for Beta Cygni III. Except for his amazing but irrelevant voice, Harry Chang-Olivier was perhaps the computers' ideal colonist: a kind of educated, enterprising Eskimo.

Joan Ekstrom-Ngungu glanced sideways at his golden face bent over a microscope, and loathed him.

They were to be married on Friday.

Silence hung like a cloud of chloroform in the laboratory, reeking with Joan's emotions.

"Ekstrom," said Chang-Olivier, raising his handsome, tiger-colored head, "do you want to call it off?"

"DO YOU?"

"Me? No. I don't." He grinned, and for half a brief moment looked straight at her. She went red with anger and turned her back on him, hissing, "Shameless—"

In the eight crowded bubble-colonies of Third the two sexes had to share the work as equals and partners; there was no possibility of keeping young people apart during working hours. And yet in these colonies all marriages were arranged: marriage by inclination or on impulse was absolutely forbidden. The Manual explained the law

mostly by talking about avoiding the random concatenation of incongruous temperaments and the ineffective combination of antithetic DNA-patterns in offspring. But a more valid reason was that the hardworking young people, though always in one another's presence, were at least spared the hardest strains and worries of adolescence. They would be taken care of. All they had to take care of, was that they did not fall in love until their spouse had been selected for them.

Devices to help them avoid premarital romance were many; they influenced ethics, manners, costume, games, diet, everything. The costume of unmarried girls, for example, was always the same and the same for all: black shorts and a white halter. Computers had proven long ago that in the long run nothing is less attractive on a woman than almost nothing. With envy and disapproval the girls (and boys) of Third watched videotapes from Arcturus and the Centaurii, lovely luxurious worlds where the women's dresses were Mobius strips one year and gunnysacks the next, half canvas and half cobweb, silken, concealing-revealing, noisy-rustling, and scented . . .

Perfumes were not issued to unmarried colonists on Third.

Not a law, but a basic rule of

behaviour, was the convention that young men and women must never look straight at one another. A girl who got stared at went home or to her Lone-Room to weep in secret, sure that she had behaved in some vile wanton way to have been so shamed. A boy who stared felt in his heart that he was endangering his own masculine self-respect.

A certain Puritanism can be helpful in a hard world.

"Go on, then!" Joan growled, her back still turned. She used the formal mode of address required between girls and young men, so that what she said was actually, "With-all-respect kindly go on, then!—Unless we both agree to a Mutual-Refusal, I'm stuck."

"We're stuck, all right," the man said cheerfully. Silence. Test-tubes clinking. The bleak noon grey at the skylight.

"Stupid damn computers, as if mathematics can manage everything," she muttered.

"With-all-respect," said Chang-Oliver suddenly in the ringing, arrogant voice that always made her jump, "kindly have the goodness to face facts, Ekstrom. The computers do seem to manage well, at least I know very few unhappy marriages here. But that's not the point. When I saw you were unhappy about this, I talked to Gosseyn-Ho myself, to-see if there were

alternate choices. There aren't. For you the Mark XIV picked me, and for me it picked you—and no one else. If we want to marry at all, we marry each other Friday. Kindly be so good as to take it or leave it. I intend to take it and to try to make it work, and I hope your sentimentalism won't keep you from doing the same." His voice rang off short, and he bent again to his microscope. Joan said nothing. But onto the petri dish of bacterial culture she was inoculating with Pseudovirus betacygni, fell a drop of salty water, and sterilized a small round patch.

* * *

The Matthew-VII Tabulator clicked, clattered, wheezed, buzzed, and spat out a new Rotating Occasional Duties Tape for Dome Kappa. Settling his hat wearily over his bald spot, Computometrist Gosseyn-Ho began to type (with two fingers) a linguistic version of the columns of symbols sticking like a long yellow tongue out of the machine's square mouth: "Enzyme Checks—Mrs. Garcia-Katastrovitch and Miss Demos-Stein. Gamma Tanks—Mr. Smith-Smith. Garbage Detail—Mr. and Mrs. Chang-Ek-Ekstrom . . ."

JOAN strapped on her power-skis and straightened up. Behind her Dome Kappa gleamed in

the milky sunshine, a great bubble reflecting the feeble sunshine and the white, cloud-furrowed sky. In front of her her husband stood erect on a low hill, impermasuit shining silver, heat-gun slung over his shoulder, a tall, gallant figure facing the sinister desolation of an untamed planet . . . "Damn showoff" Joan growled, skiing laboriously toward him.

"What?" said a polite, arrogant voice in her earpiece. She had forgotten they were hooked up.

"I said let's be off."

"Right!" he said, and vanished. He had grown up in Dome Beta, near the so-called Alps, where they did a lot of skiing just for pleasure. Jaw set, teeth locked, Joan labored after him, her skis constantly trying to shoot out from under her and raising all around her great clouds of bacterial dust, through which she now and then saw his bright figure skimming on ahead.

They started their rounds at ten kilos from the dome. It was a routine operation; they were looking for any trace of infection from the dome-town—escaped organisms that might upset the elaborate ecological balance of the native bacterial life of Third. Third was a lousy place for people, but heaven for bacteria and the lower forms of fungi. One

lively earth-type bacterium, escaped through the pumps and filters, could multiply so fast that you could watch the stain spreading; and a few escaped bacteriophages had once caused several square miles of ruin.

As for the native bacteria and viruses, certain of them were used in the production of sarcoma-carcinoma vaccine (hence the colonies on Third). They were all quite harmless, unless inhaled. In the respiratory tract they multiplied, nothing seemed to stop them, and the host died within six days.

Round and round the dome-town skied the newlyweds, slowly narrowing their long spiral. Clouds of warm, damp bacterial snow rose and danced about them. In the humid white sky the weak little sun crept across its long day-journey, sinking with excruciating slowness to the north.

"Kindly have the goodness to check your airtanks," said Joan's earpiece at 2 p.m. After two weeks of marriage neither had yet adopted the familiar forms of speech now allowed between them.

"With-all-respect you don't have to remind me. I have a watch."

But at 3 p.m. sharp the voice repeated, "Kindly check your airtanks, Ekstrom."

"Kindly check your own!"

"I have," he said cheerfully.

At 3.32 p.m. he was singing "O Spazio, addio" from the opera *Aida of Altair*. Joan had always liked the soaring music, and she had to admit that Chang really had a voice. Like a trumpet it rang out. The hot, damp, ghastly-white desert lay all around, deaf to music, intent only on eating, reproducing, and infecting. In the midst of this eternal wearisome disorder a voice sang asserting the presence of beauty, skill, coherence . . .

"Sorry," said her earpiece. "Forgot you were hooked in."

SHE would not tell him to go on singing. He was vain enough already. But she missed the song.

"Kindly check your airtanks."

"Will you kindly have the goodness to stop telling me that? I am capable of reminding myself!"

"Incontestably," he replied; but at 5 p.m. he requested her to check her airtanks.

At 5:18 p.m. they discovered a patch of mold—penicillium had adapted happily to Third. They destroyed it and by 5:22 were skiing on again, the powdery snow-clouds of germs about them, the horizon barely changing, the sun interminably setting in the north.

Just before 6 p.m. Joan said, "If we were farther apart, the

snow from your skis wouldn't obstruct my vision."

"Right. Have the kindness to let me remind you to check your airtanks." And he veered off to the right, executing a few fancy slaloms down a slope, and zoomed on till he was hardly more than a shiny dot describing a larger orbit in the distance. Free at last of the pressure of his constant presence, Joan skied on in a kind of visually alert doze. Slowly the afternoon darkened. Even a thirty-hour day sinks to evening at last. She began to feel hungry, and wondered when he would suggest they return to the bubble. But he said nothing. He wanted her to admit she was tired first. Damned if she would! She went on, drugged by the rhythm of the power-skis. Lights in Dome Kappa shone golden; and she realized, rousing from the monotony of motion, that it was too dark to see to do her job, and that he had not asked her at 8 p.m. to check her airtanks.

"Chang?"

When there was no answer her heart began to pound. The pale, formless, aimless twilight hung around her, and she felt its horror. Not that she was lost, in plain view of the lighted town a few kilometers away—but where the devil was he, why was he silent?

There was enough light yet that she could retrace her tracks.

She plowed back, keeping a look-out to the left, occasionally calling his name at full volume. Nothing. The light faded slowly, but already her tracks were harder to make out, erased by the flocculent proliferation of life in which they had been cut.

Had he gone back to the dome without telling her? The thought shocked her so that she nearly stopped. Surely he would not do anything illegal, and to leave a companion outside the dome was illegal except in emergency—and incredibly, monstrously rude. But perhaps he was angry at her, for being so cool and rude herself? Perhaps he was teaching her a lesson, or playing a trick on her? She plowed on, weary, wrathful, hungry, nervous, imagining him laughing his ringing, cheerful laugh, safe and cozy in the Refectory in—

But there he was, not fifteen feet from her. She circled back, cut her ski-power, and bent over him. He lay sprawled head downward on a slope, and she could make out in the dark grey twilight what had spilled him: coming over the crest of the slope he had skied down onto a stretch of naked rock, where a big patch of one of the virulent native phages had cleared away all other life and then died of starvation, leaving a few meters bare of snow for a day or two. The rocks glittered queerly in the dying light.

"You sure took a nosedive," she said. "Why were you so far behind?"

He did not lift his head. Only then did she realize that he had not just fallen, but had been lying here for an hour or more.

SHE knelt by him as well as she could. The bare rock pressed against her knees, making her move cautiously lest her suit get torn.—What about his suit, then?

She raised his head so that she could see his face. There was a strange noise in her earpiece, a tearing roar that scared her, till she understood that it was only him breathing hard, and her set turned up to full volume. His face was a greyish patch under the shiny impermaskin. "Harry!" she said softly.

His eyes opened; he coughed and groaned, tried to lift his head and gave up. He said something, a roar in her earpiece. She turned it down.

"Turn on your headlamp," he was whispering.

Feeling very stupid, she did so. Never having been out after dark she had forgotten the suit had lights.

"Harry, is your suit torn?"

"I don't know."

"Turn over and I can look; I'll have a patch ready."

"I can't."

His face was serious and con-

centrated, and in the light of her headlamp his forehead and cheeks glittered with drops of sweat. "I think I . . . got my skis crossed . . ."

"You hit a patch of rock, and got thrown."

"Well, my leg's bad."

She turned her light-beamed head, and winced seeing the weird position of his right leg. "At forty kilometers an hour, it's not surprising," she said calmly; but she took his hand.

"Help me get up."

"No; you might have a bone broken; and if there's a tear in your suit the best thing to do is lie still on it. I'll set off a couple of flares. Now lie still." He did, and she crawled a little way off to plant a rocket-flare and set it off. The red star burst above them, a flower of light shooting quick shadows over the long pallid reaches of living snow. It died. Grey night returned.

"Joan, you'd better ski in and get help."

"And leave you here? Don't be silly. Besides it's illegal . . . I'll set off the other flare in a few minutes. They'll bring the snow-cat out, and be here much quicker than it'd take me to get there. Lie still, now." She had unstrapped her skis and his, and now settled down by him, her gloved hand on his, the yellow glow of her headlamp making a little pool of light around them.

"I'm glad you're here," he said. It grieved her very much to know he was frightened and in pain, and she answered as serenely as she could, "Well, I intend to stay here, Harry . . ."

SPRING on Beta Cygni III. The violet cryptospores were in full proliferation, almost hiding for a week or two the colorless bacterial snow, settling all over the bubble-dome till the feeble sunlight inside looked amethyst. In this light Mrs Chang-Ekstrom's baby appeared to be green. But Mr Gosseyn-Ho, judging that it was probably a yellowish-complected baby, and that its mother obviously thought it beautiful, said meekly, "Fine handsome little fellow, yes indeed."

"Takes after his father," Joan said proudly.

"Yes indeed. And how is Mr Chang-Ekstrom, quite well now?"

"Oh, fine, thank you! Here he is now." Harry Chang-Ekstrom came striding down East Street between the mogi-pines and rose-trees, limping slightly on the leg that had been fractured in several places a year ago, but grinning like a tiger at the sight of his wife and son. He too looked rather green in the light of this alien, unpromising springtime; but he looked very happy. He greeted Gosseyn-Ho with

warmth, and the Computom-
trist raised his hat, smiling tid-
ily.

"How are the thinktanks this
month?"

"Just as usual, terribly over-
loaded. You can't run a proper
sociometric plan with so few in-
struments! We need at least two
more Mark XIVs and a Luke
Coordinator to handle the pro-
gramming for the new subdome
and the bacterial scoop people at
Lambda."

"I think the computers do a
wonderful job!" said Joan
Chang-Ekstrom with passion.

"Oh, yes, with a little help
from the colonists, yes indeed,"
said Gosseyn-Ho, buzzing and
nodding. He watched the young
couple go off: a handsome and
affectionate pair, laughing to-
gether about something, their
green but blooming baby staring
happily over its father's shoulder
at the well-made, well-planned,
orderly little world of the dome.

"Yes indeed," Gosseyn-Ho
murmured to himself, returning
down East Street to his office.
The agenda for the day lay on
his desk in his little office, behind

which in their immense rooms
the computers clicked and droned
and hummed and chattered. Next
item: Enter Rosa Yurischevsky-
Puraswami as Eligible for
Spouse Selection. Usual proce-
dure.

As he took from a file the
names of all the young men en-
tered as Eligible in the eight
dome-towns, he tried to remem-
ber whether Miss Yurischevsky-
Puraswami was the pretty little
brunette at Lambda, or the grey-
eyed one here in Radiology. Well,
no matter. It always worked out,
with a bit of luck. He typed (with
two fingers) her name and town
and Lone-Room number on a No-
tification of Spouse Selection
Form. Then he took off his black
hat, laid it upside down on his
knees, and rubbed his bald spot,
which itched. Behind him the
computers roared away, laboring
to keep up with all the problems
of a hardworking world. He
smiled comfortingly through the
glass doors at the big machines.
There were a few shortcuts, any-
way. Then he dropped the name-
cards of fifty young men into his
hat, shut his eyes, and drew.

THE END

VALEDICTORY

By PHYLLIS GOTLIEB

Illustrated by FINLAY

Back in time was a little girl who didn't
know how awful life was . . . And up ahead in
time was a big girl who thought she did . . .

FROM the seat next to me, Rosanne jabbed me with her elbow. "I think Rogan's giving me the eye."

"Congratulations."

"Meow!"

I shrugged. I didn't think she was his style—very young-looking, delicately pinkcheeked, and a little fleecy, like a meringue beaten up with water. So meow. Anyway, Rogan, though there was nothing wrong with him, had been widowed a year and a half before with a very young kid; he was a difficult prize, one that carried responsibilities, and I wasn't yet ready to declare myself in the running for him or anyone else. I kept my attention on what he was saying.

"You've had your simulated

run. You know what happens next. You get two stabs at the real thing in groups. Then solo. Remember: depending on how you take it, you can get kicked out at any time. No matter how you did in Psych. Time travel isn't a thing you can mess around with, or use for your own purposes. No prospecting for Menander's missing plays, or the lost gold of the Incas, or damn-fool things like that." He dug his hands deeper in his pockets and teteered on his heels, glowering. "When and if we get around to those kind of expeditions we'll set them up properly, we won't bring anything back but notes and maps, and anything worthwhile will be public property. So far we've brought nothing back



but the mud on our shoes, and I don't think that's changed the fabric of time much.

"So you don't have to worry about stepping on butterflies. Most of the dinosaurs are big dumb weed-eaters and it's easy to avoid them. And you don't go into a Neanderthal cave when the family's home. That's simple enough . . .

"But there's hard things about time-travel. For one thing, we're not even sure that the whole physical body can go back in time—and that leads to another one. When you're back there you feel an extremely strong sense of detachment—perhaps because the surroundings are so far removed from your everyday life, and it's certainly something you never actively experienced, but it's back there waiting for you because we've got the machine that can take you there. The effect is very strong—I call it the Back-track Effect for lack of a better name—and it means you have to be twice as hardheaded and observant as you are ordinarily if you want to be worth the government's money as a reasearcher . . ." He paused to let it sink in. "And you'll be hearing all this again, plenty of times. That's all. Anybody who hasn't handed in an application for solo have it in by Tuesday, or say goodbye."

Rosanne muttered, "Damn, it's you he's been gawking at!"

But I flipped my notebook and ran out with my head down. Rogan was all right, and maybe he did like the way I filled out my uniform. But I knew sure as certain he didn't like the way I'd filled out the solo form.

I'D had a hard life. If I say that it doesn't mean I'm going to reel off the whole soggy story. But I'd had to spend a lot longer in Psych than the rest of the Timesearch lot—I'd sometimes wondered, on that account, why they'd kept me on—and if I did not come out any thicker-skinned, at least I was satisfied to be alive. I knew I was as good as the rest of the historico-geographico-paleontological bunch, but I worked harder, because for once I'd found a place where I felt right and I wanted to stay.

After our practice runs we would have three tests to pass, like somebody in a stock fairy-tale: in the first we would be set down in a specified time with a supervisor and required to collect all the available evidence proving it was this particular time and place. In the second we'd be set down blind without supervisor, and without consulting each other had to pinpoint time and place for ourselves with reasonable accuracy: between the Gunz and Mindl glaciers, or in pre-Christian Sardinia, and so on.

For the solo we were given the

location of our choice and dumped on our own to find an important new piece of material in two hours. And I'd known from the beginning that Rogan wouldn't like my choice.

I wanted to get away in a hurry, but as chance had it, I tripped, my book flew out of my hands, and about four dozen of my scrappy notes scattered like snowflakes. It was Rogan who picked them up. "Go on into the office, Tess," he said. "I want to talk to you." Well, that was something I'd have to get through sooner than I'd counted on.

He had a fair skin, but his scowl was black as pitch, and when we got there he found a paper and rattled it under my nose. "What are you trying to do, make me out a kook for all the time and money I spent on you?"

I broke into a flush of sweat. "I don't know what you—"

"Fifteen years! Fifteen years! What do you expect to bring back, a hair ribbon and three marbles?"

"I wanted the lost files from the Skyport contracts—"

"That's the pure malarkey! Any dope who isn't scared to get his hands dirty could dig those up in the archives this afternoon. They're no more lost than my left ear!" He touched it, to make sure. "You've put together a damn poor excuse for a faked-up thing here, and I don't like it."

"You don't have to approve—"

"I don't have to approve it! I kick Timers out for this, three times a week!" He clamped a pipe in his back teeth and snarled like a wind in a picket fence. "I know your type! Just because you maybe had it rough as a kid you've got to go back and make everything right!" He had a vertical crease in the middle of his forehead, ending in a kind of dimple at the bridge of his nose. It looked like an exclamation point, and it fitted him. "You want to pull out your Geometry teacher's hair because she told you you had a low IQ!"

"That's not it. I want . . ." The truth was, I didn't know what I wanted . . . except to go back there, for two hours.

"Yeah, I know," said Rogan. "You want. You want what you can't have." He filled the pipe and lit it; the shaft of sunlight caught the blue smoke, caught his dense ginger hair with points of light. "You don't even half know the temptations . . . not for money, or even research . . ."

"Are you going to kick me out then, Rogan?"

He tossed the paper on the desk and sighed. "You want to change this thing?"

"I didn't come to work here just for this. Honestly. But Rogan, I—I don't think I could keep on working here, unless, unless

—" I didn't know what to say. Unless I did what? Resolve a thing in the past that depended not on one incident but on days after days?

He nodded tiredly. "You want me to spend thousands on thousands of dollars on a two-hour run, for that?"

"I can't ask you for that. But."

"Yeah . . . well, go on and take your tests," said Rogan. He paused with a lighted match in his hand. "Don't forget to take notes."

ONE half-hour," said Rogan.

For this run the outer shell of the Timestat was quick-mold plastic, light as a sheet of notepaper, and looked like a telephone-booth with an out-of-order sign. It was incongruous in the lab; my own feelings about it were not pleasant.

But I'd asked for it, and Rogan had put it through. Additional therapy, the papers said. I'd passed the two tests, which had reduced our class of thirty to seventeen, and he'd worked it out through Psych. And I couldn't tell you why he'd done it. I'm not bad-looking, but there's better. I'm bright, but there's brighter. I work hard, but only because I love the work. And I don't think it was any of these things that made him give me the time.

"One half-hour," said Rogan. "One half-hour passes here, one

half-hour passes there. We don't try to monkey around with time yet. I've told you before. The whole thing is too delicate. You go back there in the Timestat and in one half-hour the Timestat comes back here, with you or without you. You understand?"

"Yes."

"Well, you've got a clear enough head to handle the Backtrack Effect, so don't forget to take notes."

I went in there, wearing what now seemed the comically outmoded clothes of fifteen years before; the door closed, the flicker of Rogan's hand against the lucite panel, the hum, the flash, the spin of not-color in an eyeblink of no-time and . . .

the street.

I had chosen the winter, because in that shabby neighborhood the white snow, black branches and scoured clean sky became the architecture it had never had. I chose afternoon because I had remembered it most kindly, and two-thirty because the children came out for recess then.

The street had a kind of beauty, it had a kind of dignity, but if I had thought of it even a little kindly then I had since opened up in myself such depths and caverns of what had then been secret anger that it oppressed me almost at once. The fact that the

setting was slightly detached because of the Backtrack Effect began to frustrate my sense of purpose, because my exact feelings were ungraspable.

I plodded my way down the block to the school, leaving impossible footprints in the snow, cold in a wind of time. The impossibility of what I would find began to terrify me, and the hopelessness of what I was after down that street and along the wrought-iron fence to the gates where

she was always playing. A little scrawny kid in overgrown galoshes, wrists red where mitten and cuff failed to meet, yes, she was there. The red woollen hat pulled right down to her eyes made her look a little like a moron, but for all that she wasn't a bad-looking little kid. I stood there watching her, separate, integrated, intact, apart. Fifteen years ago the past is as dead as it is for fifteen million, just as unbridgeable.

This was what I had struggled and schemed for. And I didn't know yet what I had intended to do. Go up to her, perhaps, and touch her arm: Look, kid, you're having a tough time now, but it'll turn out all right, believe me. Just don't worry.

And she'd say: I'm sorry, but I'm not allowed to talk to strangers.

I watched her. Little kids playing by themselves in the winter schoolyard always heap up the snow in little peaks under their feet and slide on them till they become glazed and slippery. She was doing that, waving her arms to keep balance as she slipped and slid. I don't know whether I could even have touched her; she was me, after all. My heart wrenched for her. As I looked, she raised her face to the sun in its tangle of bare branches, screwing up her eyes to meet the glare. And she began to sing.

I don't know what, maybe a loony song from a trivvy commercial. But she was *singing*. With all her terrors and anxieties she had found ways to survive and love the world that I, fifteen years later, had forgotten. Her reality and vitality deepened, and it was I, now, who seemed detached, a part of the Backtrack Effect. I turned, all at once terrified.

The street was real, but strange, as if it had never been mine and everything I knew, or thought I knew, had been wiped out. I struggled with the onrushing panic to look at my watch. It was a quarter to three, and the children were straggling back to school; their voices behind me faded and were lost. I hardly noticed. I realized that *I had forgotten where the Timestat was*.

I turned one way and another

and ran, past strange houses and strange trees. Which way had I come? She was safe for now, but she would survive only to grow up and become lost in the forgotten world where she had found a space to sing. "Rogan!" I whispered. An old woman dragging a shopping cart passed me, not looking up. Had I become invisible? I stopped and covered my face with my hands. The sputter of light behind my lids was real. I was real. *Where was the Timestat?* A blank surrounded me, clinging, swaddling.

And yet I had always had such a good memory.

"What a memory!" Parker of Psych had snorted. "You remember everything! Every nasty word, every cross-eyed look, every scrape, slap, slip of the tongue! Nothing good. How'll you ever make friends with that past of yours?" I didn't want to forget the past; I didn't want to live in it. Only to conquer it and be able to live with myself at last.

In the street, with my hands over my face, crying, not caring, I turned my inward eyes back to the blanked past. There was a sparrow in a tree, singing like a clear faint bell . . . and echoes began to waken in the dark places where my angers had battered. Like bells, faint but clear, memories began to come, silly, foolish, trivial: a thirst and a glass of lemonade, teeth-locking taffy,

picking a scab off my knee, the skeins of rainbow-colored wool made only for little girls who do corkwork, the look of the street in the summer evening. The injustice I had committed against the past swept me like a red shame. I had built enough happiness out of these things to let me sing, and I had forgotten.

I came to with a start. Five to three! I ran down the street, splashing slush. The telephone-booth with the out-of-order sign was there where I had left it, and I fell into it, as the flashes and the blackness closed on me.

WHEN I opened my eyes I was on a couch in the day-room. It was dark outside. Rogan was sitting beside me.

He looked down. "You all right?"

"Yes. What happened?"

"When we brought you in you were fighting like a cat. I had the techs put you to sleep."

"But you stayed—you've got your kid at home."

He poured me a mug of coffee from a thermos. "I phoned the housekeeper to stay on . . . did you make notes?"

I shook my head, and he grinned faintly. "They never do."

"Why did you let me do it?"

"Because you said you had to. You aren't the only one. You going to stay on, now?"

"If you'll have me."

He nodded, filling the pipe. "Sure you wouldn't want to go back there again?"

"For God's sake, Rogan!" I sat up shakily.

"Okay! Suppose I told you I wanted you to go back for those old Skyport contracts?"

"The ones in the archives?"

His brows lowered. "You know what I mean. Would you?"

I hesitated. Would I? Back there, the long-ago kid I was was taking good care of herself; her terrors no longer hounded me, there was no temptation to find her out again, and the other terrors did not exist except on that street. "Yes, I'd go back again. For the Skyport papers, if you wanted them."

His brows rose. "Very good!"

"After the mess I made?"

"I said you weren't the only one. You came out whole and free, and you were that when you went in, but you didn't know it. Once, I wanted to go back . . . a year. Only a year."

Back where the young wife lived. "But you couldn't."

"No; I could see that clearly enough, though I tried not to."

I smoothed my rumpled clothes. I felt creased all over, but new and good.

"Okay!" He slapped his knee.

"You'll do! Next week, you give Tyrannosaurus Rex a try."

"You can't scare me, Rogan," I said.

THE END

Is it a bird?

Is it a plane?

No, it's the Superman
Behind SUPERMAN—
MORT WEISINGER

By SAM MOSKOWITZ

WHAT would American culture be today without the existence of the fabulous comic-strip character, Superman? Who does not know the chant, as famous as that of the tobacco auctioneer, that goes: "It's a bird . . . it's a plane . . . it's—SUPERMAN!!! Who can reckon the impact of this indestructible creature, capable of flight, X-ray vision, time travel, accelerated motion? How can you estimate the influence of a folk-hero which is sustained and reinforced each year by seven comic books, daily and Sunday newspaper comic strips, a daily television program, motion pictures, and an almost endless array of Superman-franchised toys, games, costumes, novelties?

Superman's influence on millions of Americans is enormous.



Fabian Bachrach

Now, other influential comic strips—such as *Pogo* and *Li'l Abner* have made their creators—Walt Kelly and Al Capp—well-known names. They are asked to

contribute their ideas on the social scene to thoughtful journals. But the truth is their comics are read more by adults than by youngsters, and it is debatable if they have captured anywhere near as large a segment of the youthful American audience. Isn't it logical to assume that we ought to know something about the ideas, ethics, prejudices and preferences of the man who guides the story-line for Superman?

Yet the man behind Superman is virtually unknown. What is even more unknown is that he is also one of the founding fans, writers and editors of science fiction. His name is Mortimer Weisinger, and he does not wear a cape.

Weisinger was born in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan on April 25, 1915.

While Mortimer early showed a predilection for the imaginative works of Jules Verne and Edgar Allan Poe, he balanced this tendency with a healthy interest in the Rover Boys and Motor Boys series. The fatal shift came when his parents sent him to a camp one summer and he borrowed the counselor's copy of the Aug., 1928, *AMAZING STORIES* featuring *Armageddon 2419*, the first Buck Rogers story and the initial installment of *The Skylark of Space*.

In later years Weisinger's

fondness for food made him the perfect subject to one day invent a widely adopted weight-losing diet. But this tendency was curbed as a teenager by his skipping lunch to accumulate funds to secure overpriced back issues of *AMAZING STORIES*, *SCIENCE AND INVENTION* and *ELECTRICAL EXPERIMENTER* from New York book shops. The great thrill of his life was a personal visit to Hugo Gernsback.

HYMAN WEISINGER manufactured slippers in Passaic, N.J., and the flaming passion of his life was to see his son Mortimer become a doctor. Mort enrolled at New York University, but neglected to mention to his father that he was majoring in journalism. He showed his experimental attempts at fiction, written in longhand, to a slightly older scientifiitioner, Allen Glasser, who had sold a few minor efforts and was especially astute at winning prize contests. A single bit of advice from Glasser stayed with him: "The most important thing in writing a story or winning a contest is the angle; you must have an angle that no one else has thought of." The unusual story twist, the novel approach in an article, and off-beat plotting in comic strip continuities were to become Mort Weisinger's trademarks and the foundation of his later success.

While the science fiction magazines fascinated him, he felt that an *esprit de corps* was lacking. This same feeling was held by others. A Chicago fan, Walter Dennis, together with Raymond A. Palmer of Milwaukee (who had not yet cracked the ranks of professional science fiction writers), helped to organize the Science Correspondence Club in 1929. The first issue of a mimeographed bulletin called THE COMET (later COSMOLOGY) from this club was dated May, 1930. Glasser and Dennis formed a similar organization, The Scienceers. Weisinger joined immediately upon hearing of the group and became one of its most active members, serving as treasurer and pressing for the publication of a club bulletin. THE PLANET, dated July, 1930, had Glasser as editor and Weisinger as associate editor. While the bulletin of the Science Correspondence Club was mainly a rehash of fundamental science, that of the Scienceers, in a sprightly fashion, threw more emphasis on *science fiction*. THE PLANET (which lasted six issues) was actually the first of the science fiction fan magazines.

The club received a publicity break when Glasser won a \$20 third prize in SCIENCE WONDER QUARTERLY's competition, "What I Have Done To Spread Science Fiction." His prize-winning entry attracted inquiries from

many parts of the country (two other chapters were attempted), and was responsible for the addition of Julius Schwartz, a noted collector of science fiction. Schwartz formed a friendship with Mort Weisinger which was to become a life-long one.

Gernsback became interested in the group and made arrangements for a meeting to be held at the New York Museum of Natural History. He sent to that meeting his editor, David Lasser, who had just formed The American Interplanetary Society, which then seemed even more far out than a literary discussion group on science fiction. For that matter, the first issue of THE BULLETIN OF THE AMERICAN INTERPLANETARY SOCIETY (June, 1930) was a four-paged mimeographed affair even less pretentious than The Scienceers' PLANET. Lasser exerted considerable pressure on The Scienceers to merge with the American Interplanetary Society. When the members appeared reluctant, payment for rental of the hall failed to materialize from WONDER STORIES. The club broke apart in violent disagreement as to whether they should foot the obligation. (In retrospect, a merger with The American Interplanetary Society,—which has since become The American Rocket Society, world's most respected civilian rocket group and

publishers of ASTRONAUTICS—would scarcely have been a sad fate.)

GLASSER and Weisinger yearned for greater recognition. One day they called up a local paper and informed the editor that the great British savant, Sir Edgar Ray Merritt, was to talk before the next meeting of The Scienceers in the only American speaking engagement he had agreed to. The name had been cobbled together from those of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Ray Cummings, and A. Merritt, but the editor didn't know that. He ran 14 column inches about the glories of The Scienceers and their famous guest speaker.

This tomfoolery was a prelude to more constructive things. Prominent readers, writers and collectors of science fiction received a circular announcing the monthly publication of THE TIME TRAVELER, the first fan magazine devoted *entirely* to science fiction and intended to fill the void left by the PLANET. Glasser and Julius Schwartz held top editorial posts, but Mort Weisinger, was one of the publication's mainstays. He attempted the first history of science fiction on record, *beginning* in the Feb., 1932, issue of THE TIME TRAVELER with Part II (the mystery of what happened to Part I never having been explained), and creditably

carried through eight instalments as far as Jules Verne. Winchell-type reporting was introduced to science fiction by Weisinger with his lively news column "Out of the Ether," based on wide correspondence with science fiction writers of that era.

Weisinger saw other potentialities in the printing press. Taking the best of his handwritten manuscripts, *The Price of Peace*, he sneaked into his father's factory after hours and used an office typewriter to put it into proper form for submission to Solar Publications, the creation of a SF-fan/printer named Conrad Ruppert, who published it as a pamphlet. The tale was notable for elements of political prophecy. An American scientist announces he has discovered a green ray which will cause an atomic explosion. A number of U.S. naval vessels disintegrate in a great billow of smoke as the world watches. Major wars end out of fear of the "ultimate" weapon. But the entire test had been a hoax, believed only because of the scientist's reputation.

Encouraged by the friendly comments of those who paid the full retail price of six cents in stamps for the pamphlet, Weisinger took the story over to AMAZING STORIES' editor T. O'Connor Sloane. It was accepted

and published in the Nov., 1933 issue. The \$25 Weisinger got for the story was invested in a second-hand typewriter and the beginning of a career.

TODAY's fantasy fans aspiring to be writers have no conception of the status that went with that sale. Science fiction magazines were then few in number. A single published story made a man an "author." Twenty years later, beginning writers would sell as many as 40 stories their first year and remain virtually unknown. But Allen Glasser again had beaten Weisinger to the punch in this unofficial contest between them by placing a short story, *Across The Ages*, in which a man imagines himself back in Rome during a New York heat wave, in the Aug.-Sept., 1933 AMAZING STORIES. When the story appeared, readers protested to AMAZING about the very close similarity between Glasser's story and *The Heat Wave* by Marion Ryan and Robert Ord, which had appeared in the April, 1929, issue of MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE. Glasser agreed that a change of five or six words did not constitute an original creative effort and returned the payment.

Sloane was fit to be tied. He was through with Glasser and any of his friends. This finalized a split that had begun earlier when Weisinger, Schwartz, Rup-

pert, Maurice Ingher and Forrest J. Ackerman formed a corporation for the publication of SCIENCE FICTION DIGEST, a semi-professional magazine along the lines of THE TIME TRAVELER, to which each contributed funds. Publication of the new magazine began with its Sept., 1932 issue. The Oct., 1932 issue incorporated THE TIME TRAVELER.

THE SCIENCE FICTION DIGEST (later called FANTASY MAGAZINE) was a remarkable publication. Until its demise with the Jan. 1937 number, its pages comprised a virtual encyclopedia of information concerning the science fiction world: news, biography, bibliography, criticism, exposes, as well as pastiches, poetry and fiction. Professionals contributed fiction gratis, much of which later found its way into the newsstand magazines. Its most remarkable achievement was assembling a round-robin story titled *Cosmos*, each part complete in itself, written by 18 authors and running 5,000 to 10,000 words an installment. The contributors read like a "Who's Who" of the period, including A. Merritt, E. E. Smith, John W. Campbell, Ralph Milne Farley, Otis Adelbert Kline, David H. Keller, Edmond Hamilton, Raymond A. Palmer, Arthur J. Burks, Eando Binder, P. Schuyler Miller, Francis Flagg, Bob Olsen, L. A. Eshbach, Abner J.

Gelula, J. Harvey Haggard, E. Hoffman Price and Rae Winters (a pen name of Palmer's).

The key idea man for the publication, and a hard-working associate editor, was Weisinger. He gathered much of the hot news and showed considerable skill at interviews of well-known authors, editors and artists. As a by-product of this labor of love, he uncovered numerous pen names of well-known authors and used this material as the basis of the article *Why They Use Pen Names*, published in the Nov., 1934 *AUTHOR & JOURNALIST*. Willard E. Hawkins, the publisher, while sympathetic to science fiction, as an occasional writer himself, was unable to pay Weisinger for the article, but offered free advertising space in exchange. Weisinger suggested to Julius Schwartz that they seize the offer to create and promote The Solar Sales Service, a literary agency specializing in the placement of fantasy. Their "stable" of authors grew as that advertisement got results, including Earl and Otto Binder, the two brothers who then cooperatively wrote under the name of Eando Binder, J. Harvey Haggard, H. P. Lovecraft, Ralph Milne Farley, David H. Keller, Henry Hasse, Henry Kuttner, Robert Bloch, and Edmond Hamilton. Several of the stories they received were rejects which the authors had been unable to sell.

For these, the ingenious agents resorted to the technique of changing the titles and retyping the first few pages, then resubmitting them. The results were creditable. Their stellar achievement was handling the output of the brilliant young science fiction star, Stanley G. Weinbaum. They sold Weinbaum consistently to the leading market of the day, *ASTOUNDING STORIES*. Their adroitness with that talented author, who was to leave his mark on an entire generation of writers, attracted a high caliber of client including John Taine, whose *Twelve Eighty Seven* they placed in *ASTOUNDING STORIES*.

ADDED to the editorial experience of working on *THE PLANET*, *THE TIME TRAVELER* and *SCIENCE FICTION DIGEST*, Weisinger also gained background as editor of New York University's daily newspaper and the institution's *NYU MEDLEY*. Editing as a career now interested him. He was also steadily making sales to professional magazines including *The Prenatal Plagiarism* (*WONDER STORIES* Jan., 1935) about a present-day author ruined by pre-publication of his novel before his birth; and *Pigments is Pigments* (*WONDER STORIES*, March, 1935) built around the use of a drug that can turn a white man's skin black over night.

Weisinger was not primarily interested in becoming a fiction writer, though he qualified for the American Fiction Guild, where eligibility required the sale of 100,000 words of fiction, and became its secretary. One evening, at a meeting, he heard that one of the editors at Standard Magazines had quit. Editorial director at Standard was a remarkable man named Leo Margulies, who guided the destiny of between 40 and 50 pulp magazines. Weisinger had previously entered a contest sponsored by POPULAR DETECTIVE, one of Margulies' brood, which paid five cents a word for each word *short* of 1,000 in which a good "whodunit" could be written. He made a favorable impression on Margulies by compressing a sales-worthy plot into 500 words for a story called *Rope Enough*. When he approached Margulies at a meeting and asked for the job, he got it, at \$15 a week. At the age of 20, Mort Weisinger was on his way!

Now fate played a hand. Hugo Gernsback's WONDER STORIES, which had survived six years of the worst depression in the nation's history, could no longer pay its way. Standard Magazines purchased it early in 1936.

Weisinger was the logical man to edit the publication, except that Standard Magazines had a policy that every story had to be

approved by *three* editors. A limited pool of harried and overworked men were cumulatively editing over 40 magazines and none of them knew anything of science fiction except Weisinger. They tended to "Ok." anything he wanted without even giving it a reading. Thereby, Weisinger "beat the system" and became editor of the magazine in fact as well as theory. Because of tough competition in adult science fiction from ASTOUNDING STORIES, Margulies and publisher Ned Pines, decided to aim for the teenage market. They changed the title to THRILLING WONDER STORIES (Standard Magazines were trademarked as the "Thrilling" group), and established a policy of action covers, preferably with a monster involved. So frequent and varied were the monsters on THRILLING WONDER STORIES' covers, and so bulging their eyes, that the term Bug Eyed Monster (BEM) originated and was fostered in that publication.

Despite the raucousness of the covers and the juvenile slant, Weisinger, through his knowledge of the field, managed to retain the magazine's readers by securing authors of considerable appeal. From the pages of SCIENCE FICTION DIGEST he reprinted two A. Merritt stories that had never previously appeared in a professional magazine. He se-

cured original stories from Otis Adelbert Kline, who had achieved a substantial following for his imitations of Edgar Rice Burroughs. Posthumously, works of the late Stanley G. Weinbaum were run, and John W. Campbell became a regular contributor.

UP to then, editing a science fiction magazine had consisted of reading the manuscripts that came in and picking the best. Weisinger switched to feeding authors ideas and ordering the story of a pre-determined length around an agreed-upon theme. As a bi-monthly, serials were out of the question for THRILLING WONDER STORIES, so authors were encouraged to write series using proven popular characters. Henry Kuttner, who had written only weirds, was induced to try science fiction and given the idea for a group of stories concerning Hollywood on the Moon; Eando Binder enthralled readers with the adventures of Anton York, an immortal man, while building a reputation for the nom de plume of Gordon A. Giles for sequence of interplanetary adventures, the "via" stories; John W. Campbell used a light touch in popularizing Penton and Blake, who cavorted around the solar system because they were wanted by earth authorities; a wild animal hunter for earth zoos, Gerry Carlyle,

provided an excellent base for an interplanetary series by Arthur K. Barnes; and Ray Cummings revived "Tubby," a paunchy character initially popularized 15 years earlier, who dreams wild scientific adventures.

Weisinger found that discovering a good cover situation in a story was not always possible; so his policy was to give a provocative idea to an artist and then have an author write a story around the artwork. This was to become a common practice.

Anticipating school reservations about their students reading anything as garish as THRILLING WONDER STORIES, Mort Weisinger bluffed the educators into a state of open-mouthed bafflement by featuring, on the same cover as *Dream Dust of Mars* by Manly Wade Wellman, an article by Sir James Jeans on *Giant and Dwarf Stories* (Feb., 1938). Along with *Hollywood on the Moon* by Henry Kuttner, young readers were initiated into the mysteries of *Eclipses of the Sun* by no less an authority than Sir Arthur Eddington (April, 1938).

By mid-1938 THRILLING WONDER STORIES' sales were encouraging enough to warrant either more frequent publication or a companion magazine. The publishers decided on a companion to be titled STARTLING STORIES, a title created by Weisinger. Remem-

bering the popularity of the complete novels in the old AMAZING STORIES QUARTERLY, Weisinger instituted the same policy for the new magazine, leading off its first, Jan., 1939, issue with *The Black Flame*, a previously unpublished work by Stanly G. Weinbaum. The new magazine was an instant success, frequently out-selling THRILLING WONDER STORIES.

WHEN Weisinger took his editorial post with Standard, he sold his interest in the Solar Sales Service to Julius Schwartz, who was still editing FANTASY MAGAZINE. Business forced Conrad H. Ruppert to cease gratuitous printing of the publication, and after a switch to another printer for a few issues, the magazine quit publication with the Jan., 1937 number. The science fiction fan world collapsed into dwindling juvenile pockets of interest with the removal of this central point of focus.

But Weisinger played a major role in reviving science fiction fandom in late 1938 when he made appearances at local and regional meetings, and most particularly when he decided to review science fiction fan magazines, giving prices and addresses, as a regular column in STAR-LLING STORIES.

He also gave major support to the First World Science Fiction

Convention, held in New York in 1939, by contributing publicity, money, auction material, and program talent, and by bringing Leo Margulies and a dozen big-name authors to the affair with him. It paid off when TIME and the NEW YORKER gave major write-ups to the event. At the convention, Leo Margulies watched the proceedings and then let go his widely quoted phrase: "I didn't think you boys could be so damn sincere." He immediately went into a huddle with Mort Weisinger in back of the hall and the result was CAPTAIN FUTURE, a quarterly based on the adventures of that heroic character.

Weisinger also developed new writers by conducting an Amateur Story Contest. His most notable find was Alfred Bester, who was to become internationally known for his pyrotechnic masterpiece, *The Demolished Man*. Bester's first story, *The Broken Axiom*, a tale of the possibility of two objects simultaneously occupying the same space, appeared in the April, 1939 THRILLING WONDER STORIES. Another accomplishment was convincing the sons of Edgar Rice Burroughs, John and Hulbert, to write *The Man Without A World*. He was also responsible for introducing Alex Schomburg, master of the air brush, to science fiction illustrating.

From 1939 to 1941, while Wei-

singer was performing a yeoman editorial job for Standard, comic books had mushroomed into a publishing phenomenon. From the first of the "modern" comic books, *FUNNIES ON PARADE*, published in 1933 by M. C. Gaines of Dell, until 1939, growth in this field had been of only modest proportions. Most comic magazines were reprints of nationally syndicated strips until the issuance of *DETECTIVE COMICS*, dated Jan., 1937 by the National Company, which had entered the comic magazine business in 1934. Historians tend to lose perspective of *why* original comic features came into existence in the comic magazines. It was not out of any desire to be creative but because most of the obtainable worthwhile syndicated daily and Sunday strips were contracted for. As the field broadened, it became increasingly difficult to obtain suitable reprints.

But the comic field found a life-giving new formula with the introduction of the character of Superman in *ACTION COMICS* in 1939, which resulted in a sellout of that magazine, and in the appearance of *SUPERMAN QUARTERLY MAGAZINE* in May, 1939. Original scripts based on heroic figures, preferably with a dash of superscience and fantasy, became the rage, and nothing could hold the lid on.

The two men responsible for

the creation of the Superman strip, Jerome Siegel, the writer, and Joseph Shuster, the artist, were old science fiction fans and long-time friends of Mortimer Weisinger. Jerome Siegel produced in October, 1932, a crudely mimeographed magazine called simply *SCIENCE FICTION*. To obtain readers he exchanged advertisements with *THE TIME TRAVELER*. This magazine contained stories under various pen names by the editor, plus some cast-offs contributed by kindly authors. From its second issue on, it featured some professional quality cartooned illustrations by Joseph Shuster. Siegel, writing under the name of Bernard J. Kenton, had placed a story with *AMAZING STORIES*, *Miracles on Antares*. In informing his readers of this fact, Siegel wrote that Kenton "was at present working upon a scientific fiction cartoon strip with an artist of great renown." The artist was Joseph Schuster, the year was 1933, and the strip was Superman!

FOR five years Siegel and Shuster peddled the Superman strip, meeting rejections at every turn. Among the editors who turned it back was M. C. Gaines. He left Dell to work for National in 1938, and when *ACTION COMICS* was projected thought it might prove suitable. Siegel and Shuster had been doing a variety of

well-received originals for DETECTIVE COMICS and ADVENTURE COMICS, and they were available and cooperative. Superman was given a chance and literally created the comic book industry as an important publishing business.

By 1941 the various Superman comic books were selling so well that the editorial director of National Comics, Whitney Ellsworth, decided they could use another editor. Since the entire success of Superman was based on a background of science fiction, Ellsworth felt Weisinger was ideally qualified. Negotiations were conducted through Leo Margulies, who wisely counseled Weisinger that comic magazines had a greater future than pulps. But almost simultaneously, Mort Weisinger received a letter from Ziff-Davis offering him the editorship of a new slick paper magazine they were planning to issue, titled POPULAR PHOTOGRAPHY. Weisinger was on the horns of a dilemma. The Ziff-Davis offer carried with it full editorship, a challenge and prestige, but the field was unknown to him. Superman, which required a strong facility at plotting and a comprehensive background in science fiction, was right down his alley. He took it in March, 1941.

Then World War II abruptly terminated his stint at National Comics. Happily, his old friend

Julius Schwartz, turned down by the army because of poor vision, was taken on as interim editor. In the armed forces, it was Sergeant Mort Weisinger who was assigned to Special Services, working at New Haven as associate editor of Yale's lively paper called THE BEAVER. It was on the train to New York, where he scripted an Army radio show, that he met a tall, attractive registered nurse, Thelma Rudnick. He proposed on the train, and they married on Sept. 27, 1943. They have two children, a boy and a girl.

Following his discharge shortly before the end of the war Weisinger took a whirl at non-fiction. His talent for the off-beat and his skill at finding the unusual angle made him a winner from the start. He sold four major articles in one week, including one to as outstanding a market as CORONET. All the research, experience and familiarity with interviewing techniques gained on THE TIME TRAVELER and THE SCIENCE FICTION DIGEST paid off as Weisinger eventually became one of the nations banner article writers, scoring with READER'S DIGEST, COLLIER'S, SATURDAY EVENING POST, LADIES HOME JOURNAL, ESQUIRE, COSMOPOLITAN, THIS WEEK, HOLIDAY, REDBOOK, and a galaxy of great American magazines. Eventually a paperback he wrote, *1001 Valuable Things You*

Can Get Free would go into endless editions and be used as the basis of a weekly feature in THIS WEEK. Weisinger had settled down to a career of free-lancing when SUPERMAN COMICS called up and asked when he was coming back to work. Reluctant to part with his newfound prosperity, he finally succumbed to the lure of an all-expense sojourn for himself and family to work on the plotting of a Superman movie in Hollywood as a prelude to his resuming editorial work.

THE story has often been told of the FBI's unsuccessful attempt to stop John W. Campbell from printing atomic energy stories in ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION. The story has also been told of the successful mothballing of a Philip Wylie atomic energy story, *Paradise Crater*, sent to BLUE BOOK during the war. To those stories may be added two about Superman strips with atomic energy plots which the government stopped Mort Weisinger from printing in 1945. So he was off to a lively start.

The prosperity of Superman had encouraged numberless imitators, the most popular of which was CAPTAIN MARVEL, published by Fawcett with continuities written by Eando Binder. National Comics, before World War II, sued Fawcett to "cease and desist" in the use of that type of

character. For nearly a decade the case dragged through the courts. As the years rolled past, many of the Superman imitators disappeared, unable to sustain an element of novelty and originality in their story lines. Finally, Fawcett settled out of court. It was suggested that Fawcett felt the vogue had passed and there was little money to be made from CAPTAIN MARVEL and that Superman had won a pyrrhic victory.

National's answer to that was Mort Weisinger. Rallying his vast background of science fiction plotting, he literally began to reshape the history of Superman to make it possible for new, more fascinating adventures to occur. There was precedent. Originally, Superman covered ground by tremendous leaps. When the first movie was made, it became obvious that to portray this would make him appear like a kangaroo, so he was given the power of flight. A new generation of readers were indoctrinated with a background that lent itself to greater thrills.

Ancient evildoers of Krypton, men with powers approaching that of Superman, readers now learned, had been banished to "The Phantom Zone" from which they could be released as needed to add zest to the continuities. The "worlds of if" device was introduced. This featured things that Superman *might* have done

and what would have happened had he followed that course.

Most sensationally popular of Weisinger's innovations was the device of time travel. This astounding new Superman talent opened a new dimension of adventure, making it possible for our hero to go into the past and introduce Hercules, Samson and Atlas into the adventures, or to reach into the future to foil a menace that would not arrive for 1,000 years.

Frequently, associational characters build a following. This resulted in a proliferation of the Superman Group. The big gun, SUPERMAN, was published eight times a year and averaged one million circulation. Added to this was ACTION COMICS, featuring Supergirl; WORLD'S FINEST COMICS, where Superman appears with Batman, another famed adventure strip hero, whose destinies are guided by Weisinger's friend, Julius Schwartz; JIMMY OLSEN, teen-age pal of Superman, has his own magazine, as has LOIS LANE, his girl friend; SUPERBOY features the adventures of Superman as a boy; ADVENTURE COMICS stresses Superboy and the Legion of Super Heroes. Special adventures have featured Krypto, the Super Dog. This variation on a theme has prevented youngsters from becoming jaded with a single character.

Presiding over the entire reti-

nue is Mort Weisinger, who directs the continuity writers (including such science fiction veterans as Edmond Hamilton, Eando Binder, and the originator, Jerry Siegel, who is still active) into the channels he considers most appealing to his audience. Thus, in the most direct fashion, from point of origin to present-day plot sustenance, the Superman strips are the spawn of the science fiction magazines: created by a science fiction fan, from ideas obtained from science fiction stories, run by a former science fiction editor and to a great degree written by science fiction authors.

Theoretically, popular Superman should repay its debt to science fiction by a feedback system as its readers outgrow the comics. The reason this has not happened to any great degree since 1952, when science fiction went sophisticated, is because no "bridge" magazines exist to wean the jaded away from the comics and into slick science fiction. Weisinger's THRILLING WONDER STORIES, STARTLING STORIES and CAPTAIN FUTURE performed that role earlier, buttressed by AMAZING, FANTASTIC ADVENTURES and PLANET STORIES. Should such magazines come back on the scene, they will find Mort Weisinger with his Superman Group conscientiously continuing to do the space work for them.

There are two ways to rebuild a world. Morg took one, the Lion took the other. They—and their ways—came face to face in the . . .

FURNACE of the BLUE FLAME

By ROBERT ROHRER

Illustrated by ADRAGNA

MORG heard the animal-like screams even before the black cottage had come into view over the tangled ivy-vines that covered the steeply sloping hill. He reined his powerful gray to a halt before the door of the small, crumbling house and dismounted. The faint, blue-white light of the Rock revealed running fissures in the clay walls, and windows deprived of the usual protective, coarse cloth. There was a red lantern burning in one of the windows.

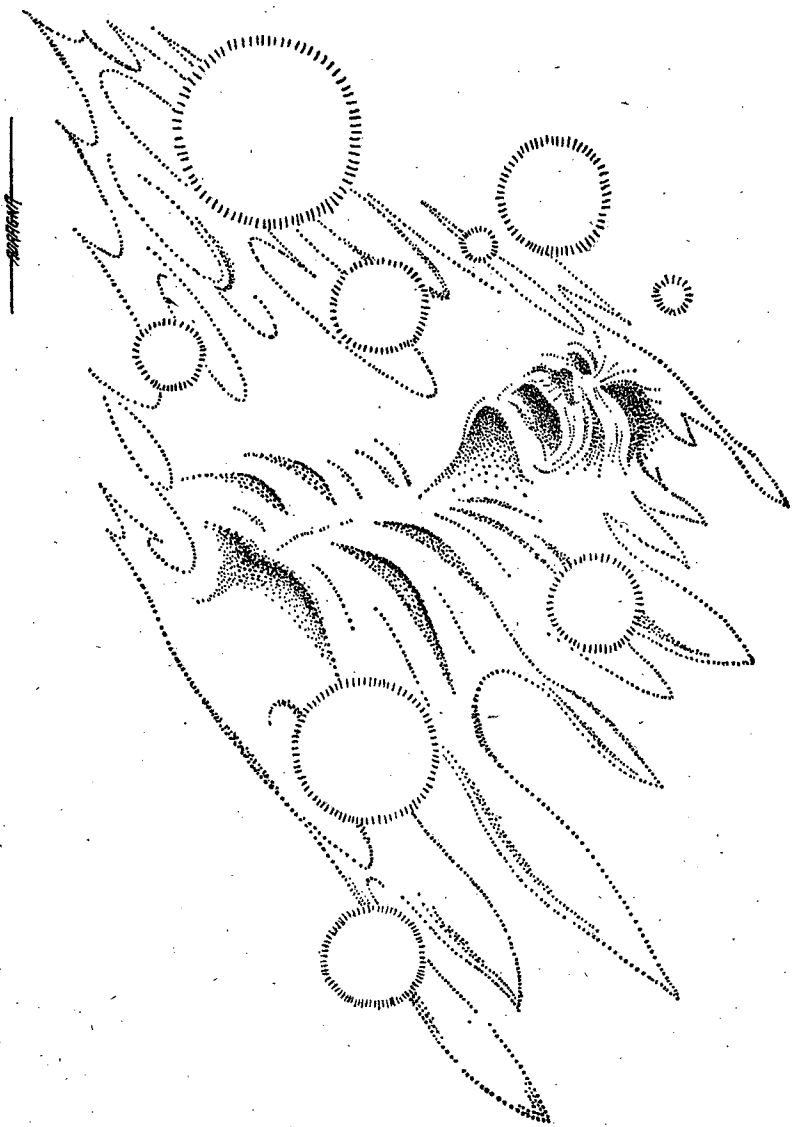
Morg walked to the crude wooden door and knocked loudly against the moaning and shrieking that came from within. He loosened the sash that bound his black robes close around him;

the robes fell slack and rippled in the breeze, hiding the extreme slowness of Morg's body. He raised a limp-sleeved arm and pounded again on the door.

The door was pulled in on its animal-hide hinges, and a middle-aged woman with prematurely white hair leaned out toward Morg through the frame. She stared at Morg's figure, which was shadowed against the Rocklight. Her mouth was partly open; she said nothing.

A fresh wave of breathless screaming came from the cottage. Morg nodded his head toward the darkness behind the woman and said, "Do you need help?"

The woman looked at Morg



vacantly. Then her eyes fell on the sword that hung at his side, half-visible through the folds of his robe. Her mouth widened; she sprang forward and grasped the uncovered hilt of the weapon.

Morg pulled her two tightly clasped hands from the wrought-iron handle and pushed her back, as gently as possible, against the wall of the cottage. "Why . . . ?" he began.

The woman interrupted him. "Please . . . please . . .," she said, gesturing at the sword, "you . . . can help."

Morg pushed past the woman and entered the tiny house. The red lantern furnished the only light for the dirt-floored main room. The lamp's dull glow turned the hard-packed earth an angry purple, and the writhing form in one corner of the chamber a deep scarlet. Morg walked until he stood over the figure. He could tell that the girl had once been quite beautiful. Now her face was spotted with tiny hemorrhages, and most of her hair had fallen out. Her chest heaved violently, and her features were as twisted as her pain-racked body; her eyes constantly rolled back into her head. Morg could see that she was near death, but would probably live for several hours more.

The white-haired woman scabbled into the hut and

kneeled over the dying girl, looking up imploringly at Morg. "You have a sword," she said in a hoarse whisper. "Have mercy on my child also, stranger."

Morg recognized the girl's symptoms. "How has she come to this?" he asked.

The woman lowered her head. "Her father was governor of the village three miles to the east. The Lion threw them both into the Burning Chamber of the Furnace of the Blue Flame. First my husband, because the Lion wanted the leadership of the village; then, later, my daughter, because she refused him. Her father was very old, so he died quickly. She is young, so she is dying slowly. She has been dying for two weeks." The woman jerked her head up again. "Kill her. I have no weapon, and the Lion would let no one else do it. He said, 'Let her die slowly.' But you—you will stop her pain? You . . . ?"

Morg looked at the girl. Her clenched hands had gouged shallow holes in the hard earth under them. Morg unsheathed his sword and, putting all the weight of his spare frame into the thrust, drove the blade through the girl's body. Immediately the girl collapsed. Morg cleaned the bloody steel on the blanket that covered her.

The woman sank into a limp heap on the floor. Her face was

again vacant, but in a different way. Morg stooped to lift the body, but the woman reached out and pressed her hand on the girl's shoulder. Morg understood. He rose.

"Three miles to the east?" he said, re-sheathing his sword clumsily.

The woman did not answer.

Morg turned and walked out of the cottage to his horse.

MORG looked at the "village" with an experienced eye. He had seen many such clusters of mud-huts in the course of his travels across the continent. He had seen them in the still-scorched fields south of Nuyuk, and in the rocky wastes surrounding Bigchi, and in the plains of baked clay north of Lanna. The huts, arranged in two widely spaced, erratic rows to form a dirty parody of a main street, greatly resembled the domed ice dwellings of a swarthy people who lived far to the north.

When Morg had first heard of the Furnace of the Blue Flame, from two half-starved peasants in the fields near Nuyuk, he had turned his horse and ridden toward the setting sun. The peasants had told him that the fire of the Furnace burned in water, and that all who were subjected to its heat suffered terrible agonies and died, slowly. As Morg had ridden, he had picked up

stories of atrocities, intermixed with awe-filled references to the Lion, a fearsome demigod who threw hapless human beings into the mouth of the Furnace. With a few learned exceptions, the many peasants to whom Morg had spoken on his ride had told their stories in superstitious whispers. *Only eighty years*, thought Morg as he watched two grown men snarl and struggle over the bloody corpse of a rabbit; *they forget so easily*.

And then he had come upon that girl and her mother. Morg scowled. He had not liked killing the girl. He had no taste for slaughter, but when killing and mercy crossed paths, his sword never hesitated.

There were only two decent buildings in the town; one was a large, wooden stable that stood only a few feet from Morg, and the other was a tall, squarely built structure which rose incongruously amid the hovels several hundred yards away. That was probably the headquarters of Tebor.

Morg patted one of the large, leather saddlebags which hung on either side of his horse; the gray began to amble slowly toward the stable. In the middle of the street immediately before the stable, a spidery mass of dust raised itself from the ground. Then, inches away, a small hole seemed to open in the

earth. A moan came from the hole, which was a man's mouth; the man's hand reached up as far as the stubby wooden stake which ran through it would allow.

The man's eyes twinkled yellowly from the filth that covered his face. He had probably lain there, in the dry dust and the white-hot sun, for hours.

As Morg sat looking down in shock at the dirty, writhing figure, a man who had been walking on the other side of the street toward the edge of the village deliberately departed from his path, moved to the middle of the road, and trampled heavily across the half-dead body, which screamed. Morg did not stop the walking man; this was obviously an enforced civil duty, and the man did not enjoy it. Evidently the wretch on the ground was a criminal, at least by the Lion's definition.

MORG hopped to the ground and quickly led his horse into the stable. Perhaps the proprietor would be able to give him some valuable information.

The blacksmith was standing over a shining iron forge at the back of the stable. He was pounding a glowing horseshoe with a hammer, and his pointed profile was outlined against the fire of the furnace beyond him.

"Ho, Smithy!" called Morg.

The blacksmith turned, smiled when he saw the horse, and plunged his horseshoe into a can of water. "Welcome," he said.

Morg heard a soft rustle behind him. He turned his head; an old, leather-skinned hag was lying against the left wall next to the mouth of the stable. Her eyes were closed.

"The water trough is around the side," said the short man curtly. Morg looked back at the now-sullen face and realized that the man's "Welcome" had been only for the money.

Nevertheless, Morg smiled. "I am new here, and I may wish to stay," he said. "I assume that you, being the blacksmith, know nearly everyone in this village."

The little soot-faced man swelled visibly. "I know *everyone*," he affirmed solemnly. "I am Li-Hai, Keeper of the Flash, and this is the stable of our great leader, Trebor, called the Lion. I am second only to Al-Bu'ht of the Hot Breath in the Lion's command." He paused and pointed to the unfortunate staked to the street outside. "Are you not going to trample that Offender with your horse?"

Morg's mouth dropped open involuntarily. "Am I not going to *what*?" he said.

The little man's sooty features hardened. "It is the law of the Lion," he said; "all men who enter or leave the city on horse-

back must trample any Offenders who are pinioned to the street."

So, the degeneration had gone this far. Morg sensed a powerful, deliberate intelligence behind all this. "Tell your Lion I spit on his law," he said.

The small man blanched. He bolted from the stable and scurried down the street toward the other square, wooden building.

Morg watched him go. Perhaps he had overdone his contempt for the Lion's law, but this was the quickest way to gain an audience with the despot.

The old hag who lay against the wall rasped, without looking up, "You are a fool. They will throw you into the Burning Chamber if you do not observe the Lion's law."

Morg detected a sarcastic twist in the woman's last words. "I want to see this Lion," he said in his smoother accent; he had automatically imitated the small man's.

"Ha," said the old woman, "you are from the North."

Morg nodded almost imperceptibly; his eyes were on the mob that was now moving toward him up the street. "What do you know of Trebor?" he asked quickly.

The hag growled. "He killed our governor, and our governor's daughter. The old man was good, he kept order, and he was trying to lift us above our mud-huts.

This stable, and that other tall building, he erected himself. He was going to build more, but Trebor killed him. Now there is no order; the Lion pushes us down into the mud, he makes us kill, he despoils our women and teaches the young boys to despoil women, he . . ." Here, for the first time, the hag looked up. "He is evil," she said simply. "It would be good if you killed him."

Morg touched the hilt of his sword with his fingertips. He had never killed except out of mercy. Never. Civilization had come to an end through hatred and slaughter; the only way to restore civilization was to leave those old ways behind.

But what, Morg pondered, what if this man *needed* killing?

THE crowd and its leaders were only a hundred feet away, now. Morg moved into the street to meet them, leaving his horse just inside the stable. There were three men at the head of the group. Li-Hai, who was grinning triumphantly at Morg, walked on the right. A heavy-set, coarse-faced individual in well-tailored animal skin clothing walked on the left. He would be Al-Bu'ht.

The man in the center was a different matter. He was tall, and he wore closely-fitting clothes made of heavy woolen cloth. His face was somewhat

square; his cheeks were smooth-shaven. His lips wore the petulant half-sneer of a neurotic, and his bloodshot eyes rested indifferently upon Morg through drooping lids.

Morg knew the signs. The man was used to physical pleasure, to the life of ease that so few could lead nowadays. The Lion, this fearsome "demigod," was nothing more than a foppish sensualist.

What appalled Morg was not the Lion, but the crowd which crept along behind the man. The villagers were looking at Morg with more than the normal curiosity he met with in other communities. Their stares were brutalized glares. They knew that something was going to happen to this stranger, and their gaping eyes showed that they could hardly wait to see him squirm, or scream, or be struck dead into the dirt. Morg shifted his weight uneasily.

The Lion and his henchmen halted a few yards from Morg. The crowd dribbled out and stood or squatted around the three leaders. The Lion surveyed Morg for a few seconds more; then he said to a point beyond Morg's head, "Take him".

Two pairs of strong hands grasped Morg's arms and pinned them behind his back. The Lion had sent two men around another way. Morg tried to jerk free

once; the hands nearly twisted his arms out of their shoulder sockets. Morg did not move again. Instead, he glowered at Trebor.

The Lion looked at Morg with casual satisfaction. He said to Li-Hai, without looking around, "This man has refused to obey one of my laws?"

"Yes," said Li-Hai. The crowd shuddered. "He refuses to trample that Offender, as all must." He tossed the last three words over his shoulder to the people.

Trebor raised one eyebrow and looked at the filthy, bruised body that lay several feet from him. Then he looked back to Morg. "Li-Hai," he said: "the Chant."

The small man turned to the crowd and cried, "What is the fate of those who disobey the Laws of the Lion?"

"Death in the Burning Chamber," the villagers replied, some muttering, some shouting.

"The Lion is the ruler and controller of all!" yelled Li-Hai.

"His eyes see every action, his hands grip every heart."

"He who holds the wand of the Furnace of the Blue Flame will release the power of a thousand dragons!" shrieked Li-Hai.

"And he who roasts in the Burning Chamber will suffer the pains of a thousand deaths."

"It is the magic of the Lion which feeds the Blue Flame!" roared Li-Hai.

"And it is the Blue Flame which fires the Burning Chamber, the Room of Agony!" Now most of the villagers shouted the response.

It was a litany of superstitious ignorance, of deliberate distortion of facts, and it confirmed Morg's suspicion: the villagers were being purposely and systematically pushed into ignorance by the Lion.

MORG looked at Trebor. The despot had been watching him carefully to see what his reaction to the "Chant" would be. Morg gave him a reaction. "Why are you doing this?" he hissed.

Morg saw Trebor's lips compress slightly. The Lion understood what his prisoner meant. "Who are you?" demanded Trebor.

"My name is Morg," said Morg in a calmer voice.

"Called?"

Morg hesitated. He did not like his surname; it had been given to him by his teachers in the North. "Called 'the All-Knowing'," he said finally.

"'The All-Knowing'!" Li-Hai leered at the villagers. Some of them moaned in response. "Tell us—was the Rock ever round, like the Great Fire?"

It was obviously a catch question, but Morg played it straight. "Yes," he said "once, many years ago."

Li-Hai looked at the villagers with a wry smile. Some of them snickered obligingly. The coarse-faced man laughed loudly.

The Lion did not laugh. His eyes narrowed on Morg. "You know of my—Furnace?" he asked. His inflection showed that he knew there were no secrets between himself and Morg.

"Yes," said Morg. "I heard of it in the North, so I came."

Li-Hai chanted to the crowd, "The fame of the Lion is sung in many lands!"

The villagers answered mechanically, "He is sung in the North, he is sung in the South. There is no place in this land where he is not known."

Morg continued, ignoring the gibberish. "It's a PWR, isn't it?" he said. "And you're controlling it with the 'scram' rod. What's the Burning Chamber—the therapeutic Thermal Column Room?"

"Silence!" shouted Trebor. "Then," he said with an unmistakable look, "you know of the *punishments* I inflict on all those who flout my law."

"Yes, I do," said Morg steadily.

The coarse-faced man began angrily, "Then how can you dare. . . .?"

Trebor silenced him with a gesture. He extended an opened palm and said, "Li-Hai: the Flash."

LI-HAI straightened with pride and solemnly reached into his smock. His hand came out with something gray, which he tossed to Trebor.

The Lion held the object for Morg to see. "Do you know what this is?"

"Yes." It was a .38 caliber revolver, and Morg could see small gleaming nubs in each of the chambers of the cylinder. He himself had several rounds of .38 caliber ammunition in his robe.

"Then you will trample the Offender with your horse," said Trebor, levelling the pistol at Morg.

"No," said Morg.

The villagers froze in attitudes of wide-eyed awe. Evidently the power of the Flash had been demonstrated before.

Trebor raised his voice. "You will not trample this Offender?" he said.

"No," said Morg again.

The crowd, Li-Hai, Al-Bu'ht—all were petrified in a tableau of anticipation and dread, their eyes upon the Lion. Then Trebor spoke.

"All right then, you won't have to," he said. He turned to the crowd and said an unintelligible word. Some of the people cowered for an instant, others did not; but all of them, the men, the women, and the children, ran forward and leaped upon the helplessly pinioned man.

Morg did not look away. Some of the people entered into the murder vigorously; others lingered around the edge of the howling mass of arms and legs, some by the necessity of space and some by choice. In a moment it was done. The blood-spattered mob moved back into a semicircle; the thing on the ground no longer resembled a human being.

Trebor looked deliberately at Morg and sneered, as though to say, "You see what I can do?"

Morg felt a great hate begin to burn into his chest for this man who loved to destroy knowledge. He scowled at Trebor.

The sneer left the Lion's face. His finger whitened around the trigger of the revolver. His eyes darted to the gray in the stable.

"What have you in those saddlebags?" he snapped.

Morg paused. "Books," he said.

An audible shudder ran through the crowd. Li-Hai's eyes widened; he whirled to the people. "Books!" he shrieked. "He confesses his evil before us! A possessor of books!"

Trebor glanced at Li-Hai with something akin to distaste; then he looked to the heavy-set man and said, "Al-Bu'ht: burn the books."

Morg started. He had expected confiscation, not destruction. He tried to move forward, but pressure on his arms pulled him back.

against the chests of his two captors.

"He who is a possessor of books will be cast into the Burning Chamber and then disgorged into the open air to die," Li-Hai quoted malevolently.

Dull plops and the crackle of burning paper came from the blacksmith's shop. Over the sound Trebor said, "Well enough. You have disobeyed my Law; you will roast in the Burning Chamber. But first—" he smiled and motioned to the panting, sweating people "—first, a taste." He shouted the garbled word again.

Morg could not help flinching slightly before the barbaric fury of the men and women who rushed toward him.

And then they were upon him.

WHEN he regained consciousness, his hands were tied behind him, his feet were bound, and he was draped like a sheaf of wheat over the back of a mule. He could feel the light of the sun hot against the nape of his neck. His face was only inches from a grassy, moist turf that rolled slowly past his eyes. The mule walked jerkily, and intermittently a gout of blood was shaken from Morg's battered face to the grass.

Painfully he twisted his face around and looked ahead, between the three horses which

were guiding his animal. He was being carried across a broad green; far ahead, crouching against an embankment, was a ruined building.

The concrete walls of the structure still stood, but they were covered with crevices and were breached in spots. The flat roof was almost entirely gone. Morg could see the dull glint of curved metal through one of the empty windows.

He let his head drop back. Since the electrically-motivated graphite control rods could not, naturally, be used, Trebor had probably substituted the hand-operable cadmium "scram" rod for them. That was the "wand" of the "Furnace," which was undoubtedly a pressurized-water nuclear reactor, perhaps the only one left intact in the continent. The "Blue Flame" deception had been derived from the blue glow that the Uranium 235 emitted.

Morg looked up again, this time at the straight-backed figure of the Lion. Superstition, ignorance, fear—Trebor was using them masterfully to dominate the villagers. He also possessed an impressive store of scientific knowledge. The man was a genius. But why didn't he channel his intellect into rebuilding civilization, instead of trying to raze the ruins to the ground?

The shell that housed the nuclear reactor was reached; the

Lion dismounted and motioned his two men to Morg Al-Bu'ht pulled Morg roughly from the mule and dragged Morg by his feet, face-down, toward the building. Li-Hai followed and nipped at the prisoner's ears with a weatherbeaten riding crop.

Morg's chin struck on the concrete doorsill, and his brain hovered in a semiconscious state until his feet were dropped to the floor. The jar cleared his head, and he saw that he was in a small, lead-lined room. Directly in front of him was a large, diaphragm-covered hole. This was the thermal column, which led directly to the U235 in the center of the reactor. The beam from the column had once been used for the treatment of cancer patients. Now it was the fire of Trebor's Burning Chamber.

Above him, in the ceiling to his right, was the emergency escape trap door. They would probably lock the main door; so unless he could free himself and jump through the trap door, there was no way out. He tested his bonds. They held firm.

Trebor turned to Al-Bu'ht and Li-Hai. "Get to the hand-crank outside and wait for me," he said. The two shambling through the narrow doorway.

Trebor looked down at Morg; then he squatted and pointed at the diaphragm of the thermal

column. "You know what that is, don't you," he said.

Morg said, "Yes."

TREBOR grinned and whispered, "In a few moments I am going to have Al-Bu'ht crank that open; this room will fill with slow-moving neutrons, and in a short time your cells will be sufficiently torn apart, and you will be on your way to being dead, you and your blasted knowledge. You won't be able to ruin my little village by exposing it to your old-world methods and philosophies."

"Why do you hold knowledge from your people?" asked Morg.

"In the old days the common people all had access to knowledge. Look what happened then." Trebor's eyes grew distant. "My grandfather told me of what happened in the old days . . ."

"You think that the miseries of poverty and starvation are preferable to—?"

"Yes!" Trebor barked. "It is better *my* way. I will grind those animals into the earth until there will not be a *chance* of another catastrophe, another horror such as that of the old days. I will teach the men to hate each other and to fear me, and then there will be no more war, because they will never again *want* to join together to plan war. I will consume three quarters of their crops, so they will be too

busy growing vegetables and wheat for their stomachs to think of war. Fear—fear and ignorance will hold them to the ground.”

“But you are leaving the wrong old ways behind,” said Morg. “You should leave the hate, not the knowledge. You can’t play on ignorance forever. It will spring up and destroy you when you least expect it to. And those people; yes, they are afraid of you, but if they once find you at a disadvantage, without your sword, without your revolver—they will kill you.”

“They will never find me at a disadvantage,” said Trebor. He straightened. “Enough talk.”

Morg said quickly, “There are others like me, who teach the people how decent houses can be built, and ample crops grown, and the sick tended; and as they teach, their number grows. They will overcome men like you and throw them aside. And after you release me from this room to die in the open, for all your superstitious villagers to see, I will teach them as much as I can before I die—”

“How, without your precious books?” snarled Trebor. “You can’t have all that knowledge in your head.”

Morg opened his mouth to reply; Trebor’s boot shut it. Morg rolled onto his stomach and pressed his lips against the

earth-coated cement in pain. He heard the door close. Then he heard the quiet whiz of gears as the diaphragm of the thermal column was cranked open.

And then, slowly, the footsteps of the three men outside faded.

IT did no good to roll out of the direct beam of the thermal column; the entire room was now filled with slow-moving neutrons. Morg could not escape them unless he could get out of the chamber. He struggled violently with his ropes. His sword was gone; only useless odds and ends, such as the .38 cartridges, had been left in his robe.

Suddenly there was a crash from above him and a plop from behind. Morg rolled over. The hag he had seen at the stable was crouching on the floor under the now-open trap door. She was holding a long, slender knife. Her lips were drawn back from her black teeth. She was panting from the exertion of dropping into the room.

The woman stumbled forward and knelt beside him. She was holding the knife tightly in one gnarled fist. She leaned forward until her gray, wrinkled face nearly touched Morg’s bloody one. Her eyes threatened and pleaded at the same time.

“Tell me,” she whispered, “was the Rock once really as round as the Great Fire?”

Morg did not hesitate. "Yes, it was," he said.

The creases that matted the old woman's face deepened, and she scowled as though to hold back tears. Morg frowned; yes, she might be old enough to half-remember the days before the holocaust. She might have seen the Rock when it was full, unmutilated by atomic blasts.

The harridan scuttled behind Morg. He felt the cold knife-blade between his fists; there was a jerk, and his hands were free. As the old woman worked on the rope around his feet, Morg sat up and examined the length of stout cord that had bound his hands. It was long—a yard. And the hag had cut it in only one place.

She had now finished with his legs and was standing up. "Come quickly," she said. "They were just outside, they must have heard the noise when I opened the trap."

Morg shook his head. "You go on, get back to the village. I'm going to wait inside and kill them. I have a plan."

The old woman showed her teeth and clenched the knife before her. "I will kill them first," she rasped.

"Don't be an idiot," said Morg, rising from the floor and picking up the other length of rope. "Get back to the village and keep anyone else away from here. There is

going to be an explosion, and for a long time anyone who comes here for long will die."

The woman turned away and, a running jump up to the open trap door. Her body disappeared onto the roof of the chamber.

Morg followed her quickly, but when he had attained the roof she was gone. She had freed him long before the maximum safe exposure limit had been reached; he would live for a long time yet, if he carried out his plan well.

HE walked from the roof to a narrow catwalk that ran parallel to a high cement parapet which formed one wall of the pit that enclosed the nuclear reactor. As he moved toward the stairs to the top of the parapet, he knotted the two pieces of rope together. Combined, they were five yards long. He judged the distance from the top of the parapet to the roof of the Burning Chamber to be twenty feet.

He would tie one end of the rope around the "scram" rod of the reactor. The other end he would drop over the edge of the parapet. Then he would wait for Trebor and the others to come. When they saw him and ran toward him along the parapet, Morg would grab the rope and jump over the edge.

The fissionable materials in the reactor were probably on the edge of going critical. Even if

Morg moved the "scram" rod only a fraction of an inch with the rope, he would receive an interesting reaction from the U235 inside. The resulting heat would cause the pressurized water to boil. First the "scram" rod would be pushed all the way from its socket with tremendous force, by steam, and thus the only control on the U235 would be removed; then the heat would rise with incredible speed, and the expanding vaporized water would probably blow the tank apart. Anyone standing nearby would be killed, either by the blast or, more slowly, by radiation exposure.

Morg would have dropped to the roof of the Burning Chamber, and would be protected by the parapet. He would have to jump to the floor and run to the door before he inhaled any of the radioactive iodine fumes that would be given off in the explosion.

He had reached the parapet. As he moved along the railed walkway toward the exposed dome of the reactor, he quickly surveyed the building.

Immediately he realized that he was once again in the presence of Trebor's genius. The interior of the ruin had been carefully decorated for the benefit of any villager who might work up nerve enough to approach the "Furnace."

Yellowed rib cages and skulls had been scattered, with a masterful eye for traumatic effect, over the floor below. The bones had probably belonged to the men who had originally tended the reactor. The ruined building must have been manned by this skeleton crew for nearly two-thirds of a century before Trebor had found the PWR and had converted it into a generator of superstitious fear.

Morg jumped to the top of the reactor and knotted the rope tightly about the stub of the "scram" rod. The rope would slip, but it would pull the rod out far enough before, and that's what mattered.

He hopped back to the walkway. As he was dropping the other end of the rope over the edge of the parapet, a horrible scream came from outside in the open air. Morg looked up, to the doorless doorway in the pitted wall opposite him. The hag who had freed him was staggering into the building. She was holding her right arm out before her and moaning. The hand of that arm had been sheared off at the wrist. Also, her abdomen had been ripped open.

She had attacked Trebor and the others! Morg wanted to curse her for an old fool, but she was dying, and she could not see him, anyway.

AS she crumpled, Trebor appeared behind her in the doorway. As Morg watched from above, Trebor raised his sword and brought it down on the woman's spine, driving it into her back.

Morg's body stiffened and tingled with a fury he had never felt before. He shrieked, "You must kill even old women from behind?"

Trebor looked up. Now Li-Hai and Al-Bu'ht were behind him. Trebor said, "Get him," and ran forward. His men scrambled after him.

Morg stood poised to jump for the rope as he listened to the three clamber up the stairway to the top of the parapet. He reached his hands out as they appeared several hundred feet away; his muscles quivered as the three ran toward him, as they came closer to the hulk of the PWR, closer to death . . .

And then they were beside the reactor, almost upon Morg. Morg moved for the rope. His hand froze before the limp brown cord. They would not grasp it. He could not make them grasp it. With one heaving effort of will he tried to lunge over the edge and take the rope with him.

He could not do it. He wanted to kill Trebor, but he had never killed in this way before, and his body would not let him now. He clenched his hands in rage.

The instant for action was gone. He whirled around to meet his foes.

"I'll take him," said Trebor, advancing on the unarmed Morg with his word held before him. Li-Hai and Al-Bu'ht stood in the background, grinning.

The bloodstained sword made slow ellipses in the air in front of Morg. Morg moved warily back and forth across the walkway, his arms outspread, his cloaks loose and flowing wide in the air. Trebor made slight feints and lunges, testing Morg's reflexes.

Finally Trebor saw an opening and made a forceful forward thrust; but he was deceived by the flowing folds of Morg's cloaks. His blade slipped between the weaponless man's side and upper arm. Morg pressed his arm against his side, catching the steel in between; the sword was held fast by the pressure and by the silk cloth, and as Morg jumped back, the gilded handle was jerked from Trebor's hand.

Trebor realized what had happened, cursed, and began to make snatches at the sword as Morg dodged back and forth; but Li-Hai and Al-Bu'ht gasped in superstitious shock. They saw a skewered man, who should have been dead, dancing about vigorously and grinning. Li-Hai fumbled in his pocket and

brought out the revolver. "The Flash!" he announced triumphantly.

MORG saw Li-Hai waving the gun at him. Immediately Morg snatched the sword from his cloak and spread his arms wide to let the silk flow. He need not have taken the trouble; only one of Li-Hai's wildly aimed bullets even ruffled the rippling cloth.

Li-Hai screamed, "He cannot be killed!" and hurled the .38 at Morg. The gun clipped Morg on the temple. He involuntarily dropped the sword, staggered back, and fell to the floor. He saw Trebor's blurred form stoop, pick up the sword, and rise over him, weapon held high. Morg felt the warm pistol come under his groping hand, and he was about to throw the gun into the Lion's face when a cry froze both men.

"The power of a thousand dragons!" shrieked Li-Hai's voice. "That will destroy him!"

Morg looked to the reactor. Li-Hai had jumped astride it, and was about to pull out the "scram" rod. Trebor turned, cried a hoarse, "No!" and ran toward Li-Hai. Morg did not hesitate; he rolled under the lowest bar of the guard rail, hung by his hands for a second to judge distances, and dropped. An instant before he released his grip on the edge of the parapet, he

heard the sickening *pop!* which meant that the "scram" rod had been forced from its socket by steam pressure. As Morg fell, he watched Li-Hai's body, carried by the force of the rod that had run it through, rise in the opposite direction and disappear through one of the massive breaches in the high ceiling.

Morg jumped up and pressed himself back against the sheer concrete of the parapet. Then came the explosion. Morg heard the spatter of steaming water, the ring of flying shards of steel, and a high scream. He saw Al-Bu'ht's body, in two pieces, fly violently into the wall that faced him and bounce to the floor. Then Morg leaped from the roof of the Burning Chamber and broke for the door, covering his mouth and nostrils with a cloak to protect himself from the radioactive iodine that was filling the air. He did not look back.

He ran up the hill outside until he had reached a wide, fairly deep section of a creek he had noticed when skirting the village. He stripped and plunged into the creek, letting the cold water rush over him. Only when he felt he had been completely cleansed of radioactive residue and had left the creek, only when he had hidden his clothing behind a bush, did he allow himself to look back at what remained of the nuclear reactor.

The top of the "Furnace" had been completely blown off; jagged, twisted shreds of iron curled upward and outward around the gaping hole in the tank.

Morg half-smiled humorlessly. He had not been compelled to even injure and subdue the Lion; Li-Hai's ignorance of science, enforced by Trebor himself, had done the job. Even if Trebor had survived the blast, he would die of radioactive exposure.

Morg shivered. If he didn't find his horse and his extra clothes in a hurry, he, too, would die of exposure to the elements.

His horse, as he had expected, was still in Trebor's stable at the edge of town. The entire main street was empty. Morg found that Al-Bu'ht had not burned the spare robes in the saddlebags; he dressed himself, saddled and bridled his horse, and rode down the street toward the hill that stood at the near end of the long green. He heard voices, shouts, cheers, and laughter.

As his gray mounted the hill, Morg began to think of ways to begin restoring this community to a semblance of humanity. His books were gone; that loss was a handicap. He had other volumes and records, but they were stored hundred of miles away in the North. Morg scowled. So he would do it without the books.

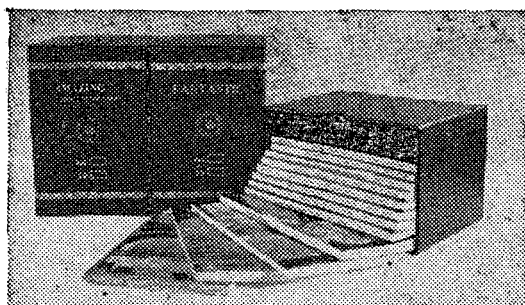
His gray topped the hill. Morg reined the beast to a halt. Below, at the foot of the slope, a group of villagers were standing in a ragged circle jeering and throwing objects at a dripping, red-skinned man who was stumbling about. The man was Trebor. He had not been killed by the explosion, only badly scalded. Morg saw that Trebor's eyes were tightly shut.

The Lion was staggering pathetically from person to person in the circle, only to be pushed away or beaten as he approached anyone. "Help me!" he was screaming. "I'm blind! I'm going to die! Someone, help me . . ." The people laughed, or threw rocks at him.

Morg frowned. He still had the revolver. With hasty but deliberate movements, he took one of the few .38 caliber bullets from his sleeve-pocket and filled an empty chamber of the "Flash." He raised the gun and began to follow Trebor's bobbing head in its erratic course around the circle. He would help the townspeople rebuild their crumbling social and governmental systems, yes; but first it was necessary to remind them of the quality of mercy.

Suddenly Trebor slipped to his knees on the soggy turf. For a split second, the Lion's head was steady. Morg pulled the trigger.

THE END



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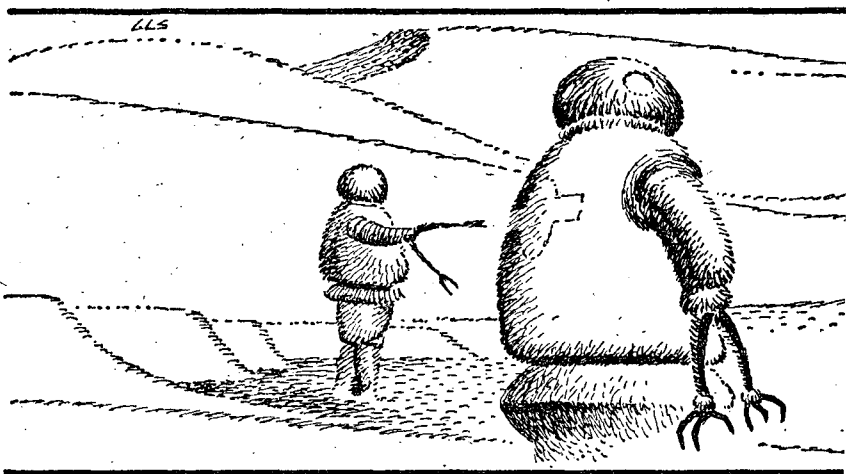
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THE electronic doorbell rang for the first time.

The sound circulated round the dark room like a cat on the prowl, and padded onto the face of the sleeping man. It touched certain nerves, telling his subconscious mind that it had come for him—and for him alone. Tiny beads of sweat glistened in the faint, faraway glow of the city lights.

The man stirred in his sleep. Lines, like cracks in the hyper-space barrier, spread over his face. The muscles began to work. His mouth opened slightly. Something that was half a groan, half a cry to be saved, came out of his lips.

But his eyes did not open, his mouth closed again, and the lines went away. Presently, there was only the sweat left.

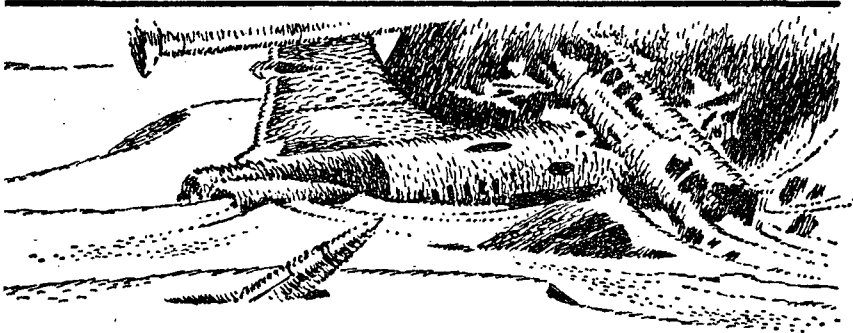


The second ring carried with it strength and urgency. His eyes half opened, but the sound did not stimulate them into awareness. Instead, it dug more deeply into his mind than it had before. It touched the trigger of the man's secret, unformed *delvin* sense.

The sweat evaporated from a face that was suddenly hot and dry, a mirror of a rugged, alien landscape upon which no sweat—water—could possibly exist. A mirror of a world far from him in space, close only in conception.

He began to speak, in a whisper so soft that it was only a

**Zelerinda frightened the xenologists,
for they could not find life where
they knew life must be. And unknown life
in the galaxy was a threat. But
Zelerinda fascinated Landi, the delviner.
For he sensed the life there.**



zelerinda

By GORDON WALTERS

Illustrated by SCHELLING

trace of a sound. The word was "Carbon"—a trace of an element. Then another, as soft, "Nitrogen". And others: "Hydrogen. Neodymium. Praseodymium. Tantalum."

Slowly, the strength of the voice increased. "Iron. Silicon. Chlorine. Titanium. Caesium." An element, once spoken, was never repeated. "Helium." His mind was *delvin*ing the elements in a certain body, and the volume of the voice was the result of the quantitative determination. "Copper, Chromium, Zinc, Lead . . ."

The fiftieth element was Neon.

There the voice stopped. For several moments, the room was silent save for the man's breathing. Then the sweat reappeared. He tossed and turned, struggling to escape from some desperate fear which was embodied in his bedclothes. He tore at them, flinging them onto the floor. He cried out a word; one final, terrible element:

"Mezrabium."

And the bell rang for the third time.

The man woke, lay still. He knew he had been dreaming, but of what he had dreamed he was uncertain. From the appearance of the bedclothes, it must have been a nightmare. A curious intuition told him that the ringing of the bell had caused it.

But what was its substance?

He began to dress, in a casual way which belied a nervousness. He looked at his watch. Three in the morning. There could be only one reason why anybody should call on him at that hour. They'd found out that he possessed a *delvin*, and had come to take him away.

He shrugged. It had had to come, sooner or later. He opened the door. The man was dressed in a neat, grey suit which was as much a uniform as a space officer's Number One dress. He was a representative of the Government, he looked as uncompromising as an avalanche, and appeared to be extremely distressed at being up at this time of night. He was polite enough, however.

"Mister John Landi?"

He nodded. "I guess I was expecting you," he said.

"You *were*?" The man looked surprised. "You're to come with me."

"What belongings am I allowed to take with me?"

"You're not arrested, don't worry." He chuckled losing his cold manner. "Call it a party, and come as you are."

AS the man—whose name was Jukawa—drove, Landi brooded quietly beside him. Properly awake and in full control of his faculties, he was able to assess the situation coldly and

unemotionally. He didn't have to worry on one score—his *delvin* was still a secret, though he shuddered when he thought how easily he could have betrayed himself when he'd assumed that that was the reason for the summons.

But what *was* the reason? It couldn't be his job, surely? Jukawa wasn't one of their regular messengers, and, besides, Data Correlation would never call their employees out in the middle of the night. Never had to. Panics were the prerogative of outfits like Xeno-Interstellar, who usually had to be in full command of a situation hours *before* they were officially called.

"Where am I going?" he asked, suddenly. This wasn't the way to Data's building.

"Xeno-Interstellar."

"You must have been reading my mind. I was just wondering what on Earth my own people would want me for at this ridiculous hour. Now, I've got to start wondering what *they* want me for. You're sure you've got the right Landi, aren't you?"

Jukawa smiled. "Perfectly sure. I'm afraid I can't tell you what's up, though. All I know is, it's important. The High Lord Chieftain himself wants you."

"Hmmm. I know absolutely nothing about alien races, you know." He said it not so much to the driver but to himself.

"Mezrabium is one, isn't it?"

Landi looked at him sharply. "Why do you say that?"

"When I rang, you were having a nightmare. I could hear you tossing around like a rocket caught too near a bunch of asteroids. And you shouted that word. Mezrabium. I've never heard of them, though. Are they humanoid?"

"Mezrabium isn't a race of aliens. It's the name of an element. Number 147. Radioactive—highly so. Capable of fission. Artificial. The total quantity in the galaxy is something less than a kilo. I was shouting it in my sleep, was I?"

Jukawa nodded. "After saying a lot of others. Elements, that is. You were listing them, as though you were trying to learn them by heart."

"In periodic order?"

"Nope. Sounded quite random to me." He braked the car, drawing up in front of a tall building. Most of it was in darkness, but the entrance was brightly lit. "Xeno-Interstellar. Your appointment is with Mr. Yernolds. They'll direct you at reception."

Landi stepped out of the car, and stood a moment looking up the side of the building. He wondered which one held Mr. Yernolds—and the panic. He didn't hear the car draw away.

Presently, he moved towards the entrance, climbing a series

of long, low steps. He felt curiously detached, as though he was stepping back into his dream—not into the body of it, but into its tenuous rim. When he reached the big glassite doors, he stepped inside as though it was the threshold of an alien world. He stopped, absolutely quiet. He sniffed the air, as much with his mind as with his nostrils. Mechanical air. Air which was processed and reprocessed, and never went outside the building to be freshened and revived. It was the sort of air he'd breathed on a dozen worlds which, for a dozen reasons, had never come to life. The air of a dead little world.

XENO-Interstellar, whose whole business was life, felt as dead as that planet his brother had told him about.

He felt, rather than saw, two or three compoids glide past him, like ball-bearings on a well-oiled race. He thought, whimsically, that they made up the whole population of the building—that there were no men here at all. Other compoids—constitutionally robots, superficially androids—were seated at desks in small, glassite-walled cubicles.

As he stood, not-watching, he felt that there was something strange about them. There were subtle hints of—he didn't know. There was a mood—even the walls

and the huge ceiling with its sunken suggestion of powerful lights reflected it . . .

He recognized the source. His *delvin* sense was waking up. Years of living with it had made him learn what to do. He squeezed his eyes with their lids until they began to ache. At first, he 'saw' nothing. There was only a hint of danger on another world. Of personal menace.

The sensation grew stronger, until he felt himself tuning his muscles for a fight as though they were the components of an orchestra. Danger. Danger on an alien world. Peril.

On it? In it? Or above it? He couldn't be sure, he knew, as he felt himself relax.

It could have been any of the three, for it was a world of deep, shifting sands.

Sands? Dust. Hot dust. Hot not only with an intense heat, but also with radioactivity.

Radioactivity?

He analyzed the fact coldly. He had had a spacegram from his brother several weeks ago, describing a hot, dry world covered with a layer of dust. He knew instinctively that he had just been *delvin*ing that world. But Fred hadn't mentioned radioactivity. That conception was original, stemming from his mind, fed into his brain by the *delvin* organ. Was that radioactivity, unremarked by his brother

er, the source of the menace his talent warned him of?

Was this planet the reason he had been summoned here?

Impossible. A six-hundred degree anachronism with half the periodic table missing from its makeup was an oven in which to cremate life, not a medium in which to create a culture. Xeno-Interstellar would have no interest in Zelerinda, he assured himself, intellectually.

"But that's why you're here," his instincts told him, emotionally.

He strode over to the receptionist and identified himself. "John Landi. *Rough Scientist*. I have an appointment with Mr. Yernolds."

The compoid switched on its quick, efficient smile. "Mr. Yernolds is waiting for you, sir." It switched off again, as impersonal as a conditioned reflex, after indicating the elevator.

"Mister Instinct," he said, aloud. "We'll find out who was right in just one minute."

II.

YERNOLDS was a middle-aged, middle-spread man whose body had fought against many alien gravities but whose mind was clearly addicted to them. His eyes had seen a hundred races, filling his brain with facts about them until he looked

on his own race as—simply another race. He was that curious being, still rare but becoming more common as the human race expanded its boundaries, who could only be described as a 'Galatian'.

The younger man sitting on the edge of a chair in front of Yernolds' desk showed unmistakable signs of going the way of Xeno's chief. His hands gripped the arms of the chair not like human hands, but in the fashion of the dactylate tendrils of the Sirians. His hair, too, wasn't styled in the usual Ter-ran fashions. It had been cut to resemble the scales of the Chilotans.

In spite of his exotic haircut, however, Landi knew that anything the man would do would be for the benefit of the human race rather than the benefit of the galaxy. At least twenty years would pass before he would ever look on the universe with the same eyes as his chief.

"Landi! You're bloody late! What have you been doing!" Snapped Yernolds.

Landi clenched his fists, said nothing.

"Don't be angry! Be sorry! We don't call for people in the middle of the night unless it's urgent. Sit down. We've wasted enough time over a simple rock-et."

Yernolds paused, placing his

large hands in front of him thoughtfully.

"Rocket. In half an hour, you and Winterbourne Arras will be on a rocket. (Don't bother to shake hands now. Do it later.) You're going to a planet on the rim of the Galaxy. Balanced precariously. The human race, not the planet. I wish it *was* that misbegotten ball of incongruences. I'd be damned sure to give it a nudge if it was. But it's firmly fixed in its orbit, for all it's got no right to exist."

"Zelerinda?" asked Landi.

"What the hell d'you think you're here for?" Yernolds shouted.

Yes, Landi thought, Xeno's chief had definitely defected from the human race. As though the interruption had never been, Yernolds took up the train of his thoughts again.

"By all the Laws of Nature. Zelerinda has no right to exist. Don't be surprised—you're against the Laws of Nature as well. All the laws we've been able to discover don't account for the existence of the human race—or life of any kind.

"The same with this planet. It's taken care of by a series of natural laws whose existence we have never before suspected. The laws which brought it to life. The laws which keep it alive. It's like life, in that respect. But in that respect only.

"For a start, it's too hot for any life."

"Six hundred degrees," said Landi.

"But there's something there which makes us equally certain that there is, if not flesh and blood, then the equivalent of life. And that something—that essence of inorganic chemistry—is a potential menace to the Galaxy. You, Landi, are a physical scientist. A 'rough' scientist, I believe you're called. You have a general knowledge of the universe. And you are experienced at putting 2 and 2 together, even if they're written in different numerical systems. You're to sort out all the ins and outs of a planet with half its elements missing, rotating round a star which is a Cepheid Variable in the ultra-short electromagnetic range. In other words, how a unique world is constructed."

He pulled a folder out of his desk and slapped it in front of Landi. "It's a thin folder right now. I want it four feet thick before you're through."

LANDI looked at it, half feeling that he ought to walk out right away. But he didn't. He knew that Xeno-Interstellar had the right to commandeer personnel from any other department of Terra HQ it wanted. He also knew they never asked for outside help if they could avoid

it. So he swallowed his pride and stuck it out.

But the monster had finished with him for the time being.

"Your job, Arras, is to find out what kind of life there is on this world. I've said that life is impossible. So it is, even taking into account that we've come across some pretty weird forms during our two millenia in the Galaxy. The report states that there is absolutely no physical sign of life on Zelerinda. Yet, there must be life there. It certainly isn't carbonaceous. Carbon is a trace element; so is nitrogen and hydrogen. And if it's not made out of carbon, it must be entirely new to Earthly science. It could be made out of brass buttons or hyperspatial vortices tied into granny knots. It's pretty well concealed, too."

Yernolds grinned, suddenly. "You'll have a ripe old time trying to find it."

"Why do you think there is life there, sir?" Arras asked.

Yernolds appeared to be troubled. For the first time, Landi got the impression that here was an infinitely weary man who'd spent an infinity trying to rationalize the impossible.

"Why are we so concerned about it?" Landi asked. "Is it on a controlled collision course? Or are the natives on the point of slipping the whole planet into hyperspace?"

"Come on, sir," Arras persisted. "What makes you think it's more alive than a hydroponic garden? Has the life-form tried to communicate with the original survey ship? Has it tried to lure it to some hideous doom? Or does it just leave footprints in the sand?"

Yernolds said, at a tangent to all their thoughts; even, possibly, his own, "When a culture is ready to expand into space, what characteristics does it possess?"

"It experiments with rocketry," Arras said, at once. "It develops a reasoned, half-logical type of medicine. It experiments with numerous sociological systems for a hundred years before realizing they all amount to exactly the same thing. It begins to think it knows something about mental mechanisms and motivations. It's art begins to explore the abstract, trying to achieve a level of communication only possible with telepathy."

"You've left out one thing. The most important thing of all—that is, if they're anything like man in the way their minds work."

"Cut the guessing games!" Landi snapped, impatiently. "You were the one who complained about me wasting time. Don't talk in riddles . . . That's the trouble with you Xenologists. You begin to think like

aliens, and act like them. Alien theatricals! All you have to do is tell us, in words of one syllable, what it is that makes you think there's life on Zelerinda."

"The culture," said Yernolds with a deadly precision, "develops atomic energy."

"Are you trying to tell us there's an atomic war going on this planet?"

"I don't know. I wish I did. The only thing we know for certain is that the inhabitants of this world have captured atomic energy and are in the process of breaking it, harnessing it. They are carrying out nuclear tests—if it isn't a full-scale war, as you suggest." He paused, tongue poised as though afraid to go on.

"Frederick Landi reported that his instruments detected at least fifteen nuclear explosions in the course of two weeks. Nuclear explosions in spite of there being no trace of an intelligence to set them off. Life that, gentlemen, must be subtle, to have escaped Landi's notice. Life that may be hostile. And, since nuclear physics and spaceflight have always developed hand in hand, life which is on the threshold of the stars. We must locate that impossible race of beings and learn all about it."

Yernold's eyes were on John Landi. They were trying to speak where the man's voice had failed

him, and had skipped along tangents to avoid telling John Landi something—personal.

Landi knew, then, something had happened to his brother.

"Is—he dead?"

"I wish to God I knew. We've lost contact with Frederick Landi."

John closed his eyes. For a long time, he said nothing. At length, he spoke, and his voice was firm, though soft as though cushioned by a tear at the edge of his eye. "We've got quite a job on. But we'll do it."

Yernolds didn't seem to have heard. "Even worse—we have lost all contact with Landi's ship."

"Even worse!" Landi cried. "Even worse. You mean losing the ship is worse than losing a damned good man?"

"Zelerinda is the site of a possible infection. The victim is the civilized galaxy. But a secondary infection—such as that caused by the aliens analyzing the ship and jumping into *interstellar* space with it—could be a worse killer. By comparison, Frederick Landi . . ."

"My brother is simply an insignificant cold virus on a sea of staphylococci," Landi finished.

III.

THE *Dirac*—an analytical laboratory mounted on an anti-gravity drive and surrounded by

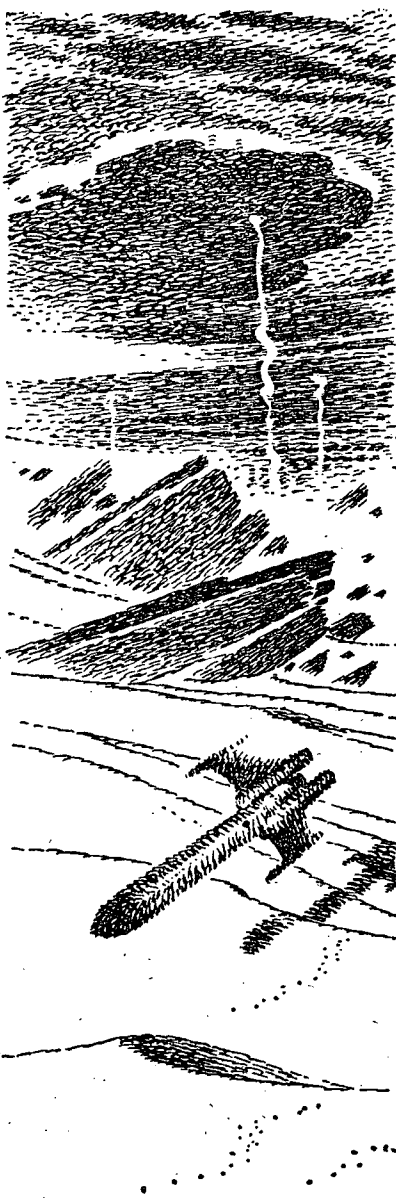
a force field—slipped effortlessly round Zelerinda. Her drive had been cut for the past few hours, but now the faintest shimmer was woven into the force field as the motors warmed up again. Poised above a single point on the surface as she orbited in step with the planet's rotation, she was almost invisible. The half-dozen small astrogation lights spaced at regular intervals round her hull merged with the torrent of stars swirling at the galaxy's edge.

The control room was quiet. Winterbourne Arras watched Landi duplicate his own pre-flight control-check. But his hands were slow, reluctant as they shifted from control to control, and seemed to say, Why bother to go down there? Our instruments are gathering in all the information we want about this world.

"Don't you *want* to see your brother, Landi? Don't you want to say a few words over his last resting place, maybe pick up a piece of the wreck as something to remember him by?"

"I'd rather let him rest, undisturbed."

"You can lie to yourself until you get a complex over it, for all I care. But don't lie to me. You know perfectly well your real reason is that once you go down there and examine the wreck, you'll have to admit that



I'm right—that the ship was wrecked by an atomic missile.

"Don't forget to switch all the astro-lights off. We'll be making enough light of our own as we go down."

"What are you, for God's sake?" Landi thrust a long plastic rod into its socket and twisted it savagely. Something started to whine, somewhere. "Are you a direct descendant of Jove, with your brain powered by thunderbolts instead of microscopic electrical charges? Simply make a normal approach. Use full anti-gravity, and descend under full control. Your hell-raising approach will do just one thing—raise the curtains of hell for us!"

"You want to land, as gracefully as a feather and as open to injury as a naked man, right next to the wreck. Right on top of a chunk of bare rock, making a perfect target for an atomic missile. Just as your brother did. I want to prevent our landing being observed by the natives."

"There aren't any aliens. I know that."

"You feel it? Have you got a lot of little men running round your cerebellum playing ouija boards as though they were electronic guitars—giving you the message? Telling you there's no danger?"

"There is danger. As soon as

we land, we're in peril. But it doesn't come from aliens."

"What does it come from, then? Tell me please. Is the sky going to fall in on us?"

"I—don't know." Landi slumped forward in his seat, buried his head in his hands. His shoulders shook slightly, as though he was sobbing. Arras' eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he watched Landi.

"There's something very strange about him," he murmured. Then he shrugged. "It'll come out, sometime. Get strapped in, John. I'm taking her down in a moment."

ARRAS strapped himself into the pilot's seat, adjusted it for comfort and for easy reach of his controls. His experienced hand glided over them lovingly, getting their feel, until they were almost attached directly to his mind. The survey ship slipped out of its orbit, then whipped down towards the planet.

After making some adjustments to his course and speed, Arras closed the antigravity drive right down and held it shut.

In free fall, the *Dirac* gained speed quickly, accelerating past the usual maximum entry velocity. Presently, a faint keening came and gained rapidly in volume. As it rose, the ship began

to shudder and jar, to surge and swing. The movement was very slight, imperceptible to any but the most highly trained pilots, but Arras knew at once that it signalled the outer layers of the atmosphere. The keening became a shrill whine which made the force field ripple like a glass of water with a violin bow drawn across its rim.

It became a roar, and deepened until it was rumbling on the edge of the subsonic. As the control room was filled with the silence of the low sound, they became conscious of a deep red glow. Atmospheric friction was beginning to affect the field, as though it was a transparent metal. Landi couldn't shake off a sensation of heat, although he knew the force field was designed not to transmit heat.

Still, their velocity increased. Arras was tense. The knuckles stood out white against his hands as he kept the ship on her course—towards a single, tiny point on the surface, magnified a hundred times by the view screens magnifiers. It was no longer a speck of tangled metal, but was recognizably the remains of a spaceship.

The glow was now almost white, but was curiously unlike any light given off by a metal.

Arras said: "I wonder if the natives will notice the difference?"

"We make a most magnificent meteor," Landi said, looking unhappily through the glassite dome at the shimmering screen. "And if you don't apply the drive damned soon, to absorb all this energy the screen's soaking up, we'll stay one—right until we become entitled to an 'ite' at the end."

"Not yet. They'll think it odd if the meteor suddenly gets dimmer. We must get as close to the surface as possible."

Arras changed his course fractionally. "The dust looks deep enough for us about a quarter of a mile north of the wreck. I'll land us there. I hope it isn't bottomless, and we come shooting out the other side of the world." He laughed.

The glow became even brighter . . .

"Apply the drive. Now! For our lives! We're in danger. Great danger! I can feel it. A blinding white flash. I can see it clearly. It's the field—it must be the field. Breaking down. Overloaded . . ." Landi's body thrust itself against its straps, then became quiet, resigned.

Arras laughed again, but opened the drive. They were crushed into their seats by the sudden deceleration, but the glow faded as the drive motors absorbed the energy held by the field. The blood drained from Landi's head, but he didn't black

out. No blackness could replace the brilliant glare which filled his consciousness and would take many minutes to die away.

When sight crawled sluggishly back, he saw that they were no more than two miles above the surface of the planet.

He breathed.

He cast an eye at Arras. The xenologist said: "Satisfied, now that we're sitting ducks?"

"Better a target than a puff of vapor."

ARRAS cut the drive slightly. Their speed increased again, but maintained a more sensible gait this time. He brought them back on course. Landi's eyes were drawn to the wreck, below and a little to one side of them. He tried to see evidence that it had failed, mechanically, in flight. But he found nothing. He would have to wait until they were on the ground.

They sank down past a cloud, gleaming white in the sunshine.

Arras said: "Looks just like a normal, Earth-type cloud. I can't believe it's *not* made of water. It looks so much like a shiny little spring cumulus, ready to clean the earth with a quick shower."

"I dare say there *will* be a shower. A shower of some element which has the properties of water at a temperature of six hundred degrees cent . . .

"Arras—take us back into orbit. At once!"

"Oh my God, what now?"

"The whole place is radioactive. Can't you see the counters? Blinking as though they got atomic dust in their eyes. Which they have."

"Dust?"

"Or the raincloud. Or the air itself. That element which is water at 600—I couldn't identify it from orbit, remember? It must be one of the transuranics—occurring naturally. The *Dirac* doesn't carry apparatus for analyzing transuranics—who the hell expects to find Mezrabium outside a nuclear plant?"

"Mezrabium?"

Landi looked at him, then turned his eyes away under the steady gaze of the xenologist.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have panicked. But for a moment, I thought we were stepping into the middle of an atomic bomb. Our screens will protect us from the radioactivity . . ."

"Mezrabium," repeated Arras.

"Or some other element like it."

"Mezrabium. You're certain of it. I'll believe you."

And once more Landi turned away from Arras' eyes. He watched the xenologist's hands weave among the controls. The ship seemed almost to dance, as it acquired the correct set of coordinates for the touch-down.

She edged towards the ground, a few feet at a time, like a big fish taking a look at a suspicious bait. Then they were level with the surface, and Arras stopped her for a moment.

"In we go."

Landi watched as the loose dust swirled and whirled up round the force field, then grew thicker until it was a solid mass. The patch of light at the top of the glassite dome was washed out, and they now had only the lights of the cabin to see by. After an eternity, just as Landi thought the dust really *was* bottomless, there was a gentle bump. They had touched solid ground.

"We've arrived," said Landi.

"Through no fault of yours."

"*Mine?*"

"D'you realize we were hovering above the ground for five-ten-minutes. As helpless as—as a pair of wet socks hanging on a line. All through you . . ."

"Me?"

"Not only do you have ouija boards giving you messages—you start seeing things. And I have to stop and listen to you, try and fathom you out. John Landi, alien créatures are my business. You've been acting like an alien entity—and not one, either. Two. At least. Maybe a lot more."

"I'm sorry. But we're safe, anyway. There are no aliens

here. Never were. Zelerinda's lifeless." He turned away, began to operate a couple of instrument controls. "Got—plenty of work still to do."

"How about going outside—to see the wreck?"

SUDDENLY, incredibly, Winterbourne Arras gave a cavernous yawn. It, too, resounded mainly in the subsonic regions, as though it had been born in a gigantic iron cauldron. To Landi, it seemed as though it was a vessel into which all Arras' thoughts had been poured, and which were even now being stirred and sifted.

"At least two entities," he repeated, so softly he could hardly be heard. "Two bits of two entities. Odd little bits, almost without identity. As incomplete—as deficient of some of its elements—as Zelerinda."

Landi didn't appear to hear. He was working hard adjusting one of the instruments. But Arras could see by the careful, measured movements of his hands that the man was listening to every word he said.

"My partner—bits and pieces of an entity. He listens to messages played into his mind by electronic ouija-guitars. He *sees* things. I wonder what he sees right now? I'll bet it isn't the face of a spectrophotometer. I wonder if it's Zelerinda . . ."

Landi had stopped working. He was stock still, as though he was listening in to somebody else's thoughts which the slightest disturbance would shatter into fragments.

"I wonder if it's Zelerinda, which, like my partner, is only bits and pieces of a whole. Yes, I think it's Zelerinda he sees. Half a planet . . ."

"A whole," said Landi.

"A whole planet?"

"No. A whole—I don't know. A whole something."

"Something with a blinding white flash?"

"Perhaps. Probably. Almost certainly. Without doubt."

"Grades of certainty," Arras mused. He slapped Landi on the back, his mood abruptly changed. "Come on, we've got to go outside. It won't be so bad. You know, you remind me of a youngster waiting to be called up to do service with our military forces. Because you don't know what it's really like, you're afraid, and every step you hear you think belongs to the military police."

"The forces? What have they got to do with—with . . ."

"Yes. Go on. With what?"

"Nothing."

"Everything," Arras corrected. "People who try to avoid their military service can never be called true citizens of the galaxy. They're failing in their duty to the rest of mankind. It's

a kind of desertion, worse, even, than absconding during the course of a battle, for instance."

"I'm not a deserter. I served my time."

"Who's talking about the forces?" Arras snapped.

"You are, of course," Landi snapped, too quickly.

ARRAS beamed broadly. "Of course. What else?" His tone suggested that he was about to slip back into his reflective mood again. "We've spent another quarter of an hour sitting here, while the natives might be sifting the sands for us a couple of yards away. But we can't start our work while one of us is still acting as though he's infected by the bits and pieces—the offal of a couple of entities." Arras had turned away from Landi, and his voice had dropped to scarcely more than a whisper. Landi had to strain to hear, he noted.

"But we mustn't be too hard on him," he told his control column earnestly. "It must be hell living with a lot of bits and pieces in his mind. It must confuse things terribly. It's so hard to ignore the entities completely when they're always knocking at the portals of the mind, (*even though it must be done.*) Always promising but, because of their incompleteness, never delivering anything more than flashes of inspiration.

"Quite a few people carry these little entities around with them. Tortured souls whose work, whose judgement, is always upset by their guests. So the government decided, with a wisdom rarely shown by any government, to take care of these people—and try and find out all they could about the little entities. Try to develop them as well, develop them into something useful. Something more than a patchy ability to foresee physical disasters. And something more than a hint of a promised ability to see—esp?—the structure of objects. The basic structure of the universe, an intimate communion with must be the next ability to develop in man . . ."

He stopped. He hadn't intended to become as explicit as that. He'd hoped to pass on to Landi the knowledge that he was aware of the man's talents without actually accusing him of failing to do his duty by entering the *Delvin* labs, but his tongue had been carried away by his flow of thoughts.

"To hell with it! I'll come straight out with it! You're a *delviner*. You're the unfortunate possessor of a sense or sense early in the process of evolution in man. A very early stage, I'd say. What the *delvin* really is leading up to, Heaven only knows, in spite of what I said earlier. But right now, the only

place for it is a research lab. Not out here, in the field. You're like a blind man who suddenly gets a very little bit of sight, so that he sees fleeting glimpses of things. He tries to orientate himself with them, and bumps into objects he would have otherwise avoided."

"With time, the blind man might learn to use his little sight. It's better to try and make use of what you have than remain cooped up in laboratories with scientists plying instruments and prying your brain tissue. One day, I know, I'll be able to do something useful with my talent. But to do this, I must try and use it at every opportunity . . ."

"Not here. Not on Zelerinda. I'm a xenologist, you're a *rough scientist*. We're here to complement each other, and between us find the life-form which is making the atomic explosions your brother reported . . ."

"No life is involved with them."

"Why not?"

"When we came in to land, I *delvined* an atomic explosion."

"The white flash you saw?"

"Yes. And as you probably know perfectly well, one of the few facts known about the prophesying side of *delvining* is that all disasters foreseen are *natural* disasters. Landslides. Continents splitting in half. Suns going nova. Typhoons. Nobody has

ever forseen, say, a spaceship crashing . . ."

"There's always a first time. And *delvinig* is still too piece-meal, too empirical an ability for anybody to form definite rules about it. But forget about *delvinig*. It's only clouding our work." Arras paused, to gain breath and change the subject.

THERE has to be an intelligent agency behind the atomic explosions. The basic cause of a nuclear explosion is the increase beyond critical mass of a suitable element. If a critical mass of a nuclear element existed in nature, it's lifetime would be nil. It would explode at once. If the mass of the element was sub-critical, there would never be an explosion, until another piece of metal was added to it. *Then*, and only then, would there be an explosion. A definite agency has to manipulate the two sub-critical masses together. Two chunks of fissionable material might be joined together by accident once in a billion years—even assuming that they existed as chunks in the first place. But the element would probably be in the form of a dilute ore. If it occurred in the free state, even, it would also be very dilute, on account of most of it having deteriorated by the normal process of radioactivity. So, for fission to take place, it has to be concentrated—and

something has to direct the concentration."

"And so, I suppose, there *must* be life," Landi said, with an air of resignation. "But on a world of 600 degrees centigrade?"

"The human race," said Arras, seriously, "is in the most terrible danger imaginable—from the unknown. The unsuspected. Until we learn how and why and in what form life exists on Zelerinda, we won't be out of danger. Coldly, the facts are these. Zelerinda lacks any significant quantity of several basic elements—nitrogen, hydrogen, carbon. All these are essential to life. There's plenty of oxygen, but most of it is tied up in various oxides. The atmosphere contains some oxygen, high concentrations of several inert gases, and the vapor of this transuranic element."

"Mezrabium . . . I've just thought of something. I was shouting the word in a dream just before I was called to Yernold's office. Before then, I'm told I was reeling off a list of elements. I wonder . . ."

"*Forget about delvinig*, will you! We have Mezrabium in the air, forming clouds, presumably raining sometimes. It takes the place of water, I guess, to make the planet's sky full of pretty little clouds . . . *Hey*, maybe that's the answer!"

"What is?" said Landi, rather grumpily.

"There's no water on this planet. Not enough hydrogen. But there is Mezrabium. It condenses into droplets under the equivalent of the conditions that form clouds on Earth. Perhaps it's not present as the element but as the oxide. Perhaps it's the six hundred degree equivalent of water in all respects. Perhaps the basic elements of life on Zelerinda are oxygen, this element, and a couple of others which usually turn up as linings for water-pipes or poisons. All given the final slap into consciousness by the natural radioactivity of your element."

"It's an idea," Landi said, doubtfully. "But even if it's true, even allowing that my *delvin* was misleading me, how come we haven't seen any trace of the life-form itself. How come the only trace of it's existence so far is the nuclear explosion?"

"We've been talking for hours, it seems," said Arras, wearily. "I think it's high time we stopped talking, and started the leg-work. We've obviously got to search pretty carefully to find the natives. Talking about them won't get us any further at this stage. So I suggest doing what we were going to do in the first place—going outside. We'll look at your brother's ship first, and decide whether it *was* a nuclear explosion which wrecked it, or—a natural catastrophe."

He looked hard at Landi. But his expression was not one of derision. He had just had the unpleasant thought that a fully developed *delvin* might be the only way possible of identifying the life on Zelerinda.

IV.

THEIR spacesuits were simply miniature versions of the *Dirac* built in a grotesquely human form. They included both a small anti-gravity unit and a force-field generator which had been designed to be precisely out-of-phase with the ship's field. This allowed the field and its contents to pass through as though the ship's field did not exist at that point.

Landi had cheered up considerably. He was almost grinning as he wrapped himself up in his suit. Arras expected him to burst into song at any moment. He looked more at home in a spacesuit than out of one. Whether it was due to his normally working under non-viable conditions or simply because he had a liking for the things, Arras did not know. He shuddered. All he knew was, *he* hated the abominations.

They passed out of the airlock and through the ship's field. They felt far less resistance than they had expected.

"It can't be very dense," Landi

commented. "I think we can cut our fields." He snapped his off. The dust surged round him. Arras stared at the featureless wall of dust a few inches from his nose, but waited for Landi's radio to come on again. When the rough scientist spoke, his voice trembled with a curious, almost ecstatic quaver.

"This is strange—wonderful—almost ethereal. The dust. It seems to be alive. Electric. Even through the suit, I can feel it. Cut your field, Arras. It's like—sparkling wine."

Arras hesitated, his mind at that moment wondering in what weird forms Zelerinda might make its life. Was the dust a living organism?

He switched it off.

"You're right. I've never felt anything like it. I feel—quick! Like quicksilver."

"Or quicksands. I think I know what it is. The dust is highly charged, electrostatically. We'll have to be careful not to discharge ourselves. It's amazing stuff. It's very fine, very light." Though Arras couldn't see him, he imagined Landi letting the stuff flow through his fingers—then laughed at himself when he realized that you couldn't allow dust to flow through your fingers when you were immersed in a sea of the stuff. Or could you? Of course you could, he amended, and did so.

"It's almost as though it's an emulsion—a mixture of solid and air as close to being homogenous as it's possible to get."

"The ideal medium for Zelerinda's hot-world life," murmured Arras.

They switched their anti-gravity units on; and rose slowly through the dust, checking their sub-wave beacons at regular intervals to make sure they could always find the ship. There was a persistent crackling of static, but they had to put up with it. They couldn't afford to lose the *Dirac*.

To be lost would be to die slowly . . .

They broke through the surface of the dust quite unexpectedly—there had been no preliminary lessening of the darkness. They broke with a weird, unsettling kind of splash, and saw clouds of dust whisked away by a fairly strong wind. It was blowing over a rippled plain of dust. The ripples were about a foot apart, like the furrows of a ploughed field. But they were not still. They moved along, blown like the waves of a Terran sea, yet more slowly, and in a more orderly manner. They washed against an outcropping of rock with puffs and spray-like bursts. Dry breakers that were laced with glittering blue sparks which crackedle against the remains of the wrecked survey ship.

The color of the dust was grey, yet it held a dark hint of liver within its body. Red oxides? Or the red heat of the high temperature?

They moved towards the wreck under a blue sky incredibly like Earth's. Looking at those clean white clouds, Arras felt an almost irresistible desire to fling his suit from him.

YOU were right," Landi said. "An atomic explosion did this, without a doubt. The ship was airborne at the time, and the missile exploded a short distance from its nose, I think. Fred—never stood a chance. He must have been killed instantly, cremated the second his screen overloaded. There—there's nothing left of him."

It seemed the respectable thing to do to remain silent for a while, each with his own thoughts. Aware that they made fine targets, still they stood there, Landi staring at the ship, Arras at the clouds. He watched them growing into healthy piles in the space of a few minutes, then growing old and tattered and wispy, to die like old men. Just like the clouds on Earth. And, like the clouds on Earth, one of them continued to grow when it should have died. It was heavy, black at the base. It was almost directly above them.

Landi began to speak, voicing

the thoughts which, perhaps, he should have spoken in Yernold's office. "Where are you, the aliens who killed my brother? Why did you do it? What harm did he do? Show yourselves—let us look at you. What is your form? Are you like human beings—or Sirians, or the things from Beta Herculis? Why did you destroy our ship? We were only visiting . . ."

Arras felt a blow against his helmet. Fear slashed at him. For a second, he thought that some entity had struck out at him.

There was a second blow, and a third, before he raised his personal force field. He saw drops of liquid flatten themselves against the field, presenting smooth, mirrorlike faces to his eyes. They were like mercury, save that they spread like water instead of remaining globular. They glowed slightly . . .

They were like water!

He laughed his initial fear away.

The cold fact—the *hot* fact was that it was raining. It was raining metal in a world which was too hot to allow it to solidify.

Landi also had his force field up, like a huge umbrella. And Arras laughed again. The physicist looked like a Dalmatian dog—or a grey, spotted mushroom.

"Just like Earth, ain't it? Complete with April showers."

Landi stooped to look more carefully at the rain falling into

the dust. "This stuff is so like water it might have been made by King Neptune himself. It wets surfaces. It diffuses into dust like water would, changing into wet little lumps of mud. I wonder how many of the properties of water it does have? How many of the once *unique* properties of water?"

"The properties which make life possible?"

"Exactly!"

"I'll bet it has all the important ones."

THE 'rain' beating on them became abruptly much heavier. They could almost feel its weight against the force fields. It became dark as it covered them.

After perhaps a minute, the rain stopped abruptly. The force field was now almost opaque, covered with the 'water'. Arras switched it off. The coat of 'water' burst into a shower of droplets and tumbled about him. The hot surface of the rock dried almost immediately, steam coiling round them.

"This is truly an *alien* world," he murmured. "A world with a sea of dust. With an air full of 'water'. Full of vapor which condenses and tumbles into the sea. 'Water' which could be absorbed onto the surface of the dust particles which cover the planet, to give a heterogenous, not a ho-

mogenous, ocean. A metal-aqueous environment from which life could spring. The dust is dry, here on the surface where any 'water' would quickly evaporate.

"But deep down, in the valleys, the deeps, there will be large reservoirs of Mezrabium, where it is too cool for the metal to evaporate. There, in a kind of emulsion of air and solid and 'water', life will form. We'll have



to go down deep to find it, I think. But we'll find it!"

Arras could see little of Landi inside his still largely opaque field. But he saw all he wanted to see—a nod.

"It's stopped raining, John. Shake it off. Like a dog!"

Landi didn't move.

Arras' eyes narrowed. Oh, no

"You're not *delvining*, are you?"

"Look. On the horizon. I feel—I know a bomb is going to explode there, soon."

Arras looked carefully. "I can't see anything. I don't see how you can, either. There's just a big storm building up."

The storm was black as night, frightening in its immensity, and Arras couldn't repress a shudder as he looked at it. It was the first thing they'd seen to suggest that this world held more than a brilliant sparkle of goodness—the first thing since the wreck, of course. But he'd seen plenty of thunderstorms on Earth. Heavy rain, flashes of lightning, a big noise—that was all they were. This was no more a precursor of nuclear doom than any of those Earthly storms. But all its basic homeliness couldn't prevent him from saying:

"I pity any poor creature caught out under the base of that cloud."

He saw the opaque coat round Landi suddenly shatter. But the rough scientist switched it on again, immediately.

"Leave it off," Arras urged. "The storm's miles away."

"Switch *yours* on," said Landi, quietly.

A streak of lightning severed the thundercloud in two, but Arras didn't see it. "Hell, John,

we've achieved all we're going to up here. Let's get back to the ship and start searching for those valleys."

"Put your field on at once! Arras, didn't you see that flash of lightning?"

"Wasn't looking. What's the matter?"

"It was straight. Absolutely straight. Have you ever seen lightning on Earth that was dead straight?"

"So what if it is? It's still lightning. Whether it's crooked on one world and straight on another doesn't matter. The odds are still a million to one against it hitting us, even if we were under that storm."

"I—I hope you see the next one. It—It's unearthly."

THERE was another flash, stronger, thicker this time. It crossed from the left shoulder of the cloud to the right shoulder, almost horizontal.

Arras shuddered again. For the first time since they'd broken the surface of the dust, he was reminded of six hundred degrees of heat which burned outside his suit. He switched on his field. "You're right. It's—as though it came from the depths of the hell in a dead sun."

"It's *nothing* like a storm on Earth . . . If this is what the 'water' of this planet does to a simple thunderstorm, what does

it do to the life it gives birth to?"

He saw Landi gliding slowly over the dust towards the point under which their ship lay. The man was slowly sinking into the dust, as though he couldn't wait to submerge.

"Hell, it's twenty miles away," Arras said. But he followed, nevertheless.

"Back to the ship," said Landi. "And into space."

They submerged completely, making their way by the sub-wave beacon on the *Dirac*. They had gone perhaps half the distance when the dust was torn away by a violent blast. Arras felt his forcefield almost cave in under the pressure. He flung the anti-gravity drive full on, to get him clear of the ground. If he was dashed against a rock, even the forcefield might not save him.

After eons of being tossed about in the opaque, tortured duststorm, the turbulence diminished and he found himself thrusting above it. He could see it swirling below him, billowing in some cosmic anguish. It was almost peaceful, here above the chaos.

He stopped his climb and hovered, looking around for Landi. He couldn't see him. Had he failed to get clear of the ground? Had he been—killed?

Then he heard Landi's personal

beacon operating, and located his position. He was about three miles away and a thousand feet higher. The rough scientist had been quicker off the mark than he. He wasn't surprised—the man had been expecting something drastic to happen. And it had. He touched his suit controls and climbed towards Landi.

It was then that he saw what lay on the horizon. At the place where the big storm-cloud had been boiling was a gigantic mushroom. Seething with hidden after-energies, it was still expanding. Of the original cumulonimbus, nothing remained. The storm had been torn asunder by the atomic explosion.

"See it?" Landi's voice came into his ear phones.

"Yes."

They were silent, waiting for the shockwaves below them to die down. The dust slowly settled. It no longer whipped and splashed in torn fury. It was calm once more. They eased towards the beacon of the *Dirac*, hands poised over their controls in case a belated eddy should catch them. As the dust rose above their hands once more, it seemed to loosen their tongues.

"We've learned quite a lot about the natives," said Arras.

"Yes?"

"We know two of the things they dislike. Strangers—and thunderstorms."

"Hmmm," Landi mused aloud.

"What's on your mind?"

"I don't know. Just a feeling."

"*Delvin*ing again?"

"It warned me of that explosion. I wish—I wish it was more fully developed. If only I could—I don't know. I just think the whole answer to the problem would be clear if the *delvin* was fully developed."

"There's *no* problem, except finding the blasted natives. I suggest we start searching directly underneath that storm. They probably blew it up before it started raining on them, or struck them with lightning."

"Let's hope we find them quickly. If we don't, I feel sure we'll die."

V.

ON the third day of the search, Arras was close to giving up.

"Not a blasted thing! This place is as surely lifeless as if it was in the middle of the sun. You were right. There's never been life here. And your talent was right, too."

"There *might* be something at the bottom of this next deep," Landi said. "It's the biggest and deepest the instruments have discovered, so far. If life is anywhere, it's below us now."

Arras shook his head. "We've burrowed a thousand feet down.

Even though the electrostatic charges keep it quite loose at that depth, and therefore as fluid as higher up, it's always bone dry. Mezrabium just never penetrates that deep. It stays in the upper layers and evaporates at once, even after the heaviest downpour."

"Curious, isn't it?" Landi laughed. "I mean, how we've each come round to the other's old way of thinking. Now it's *I* who insist there must be life here."

"That's only because you're afraid. You keep seeing your atomic explosion looming up in the future. You are convinced that *delvin*ing only applies to natural agencies. You feel that if life can be found to be the cause of the explosions, the one which rules your life will never happen. Illogical—but practically every damn thing concerned with *delvin*ing is illogical. John, don't you realize that it doesn't matter whether there is life any more, or not?"

LANDI was piloting the *Dirac*. It was early afternoon, and they were flying about three thousand feet above a wide expanse of dust. It was about three hundred miles wide. The air felt quick and alive—it was another of those incredible spring days with small clouds forming and dying.

Since arriving on Zelerinda, they'd got quite used to the idea of a fissionable element being present as vapor in the atmosphere. At first, looking and acting so much like water, they'd tended to forget its other properties. It condensed at 573°C and froze at 450°C. It was present as the element, and not as the oxide as Arras had suggested. It broke down, in the due course of natural decay, into certain heavy metals, whose oxides formed the bulk of the dust, and neon, which formed the bulk of the atmosphere.

Critical mass was something two pounds. Landi had once thought that condensation in clouds might possibly cause an explosion, but he had quickly thrown that idea overboard. Though even a small cloud contained several times the critical mass of Mezrabium, it was too diluted, spread over too large a volume. When it condensed, it formed drops of perhaps a hundred grains weight—hardly two pounds. When it fell to the ground, it was absorbed too quickly, and never had a chance to form a critical concentration. When it touched solid rock, it evaporated almost at once.

They had also watched several storms in different parts of the world, but all but one of them had blown itself out in a comfortably meteorological manner.

The one exception which, as Arras had said, was the granddaddy of all storms, *was* destroyed, did not prove anything save that either the natives only took the trouble to destroy big storms, or blew up storms at certain places.

"It's certainly done any idea of natural causes in the eye," Landi had said. "If some unknown Fifth Law of Critical Masses was operating here, it would hardly be so selective as to pick one storm against another. There must be life here, somewhere."

IN spite of Mezrabium being present in such an attenuated form, there were still many hundreds of tons of it on the planet. The place was the most valuable source of fissionable materials ever discovered. When it rained, all man would have to do was catch it—in special containers, of course.

The three days had not found the source of the explosions. But they had changed Zelerinda from a puzzling piece of rock to a commercial proposition—and therein lay the real danger of the place.

Arras repeated: "It doesn't really matter whether there is life here or not. Man is going to come here in force. He's not going to bother his head about the occasional explosion. He'll take his chances on that. All he's interested in is the loot."

"You sound terribly bitter," murmured Landi.

"If I am, it's as a result of our finding nothing, I think," Arras said, wearily. "I still believe there's life here, really. It's just that I'm discouraged. I'm still sure your brother was blown up deliberately. I'm only surprised that we haven't been attacked ourselves. There's probably a reason for it. Frederick was on Zelerinda for a fortnight before they killed him. Perhaps they're a very slow-moving form of life. Perhaps they'll take a fortnight to prepare to destroy us . . ."

"We're over the place now." Landi looked long and hard at Arras. "I am sure we'll find—what we're looking for down there."

"*Delvinig?*"

Landi shrugged. "There's a cloud forming just upwind of us that looks as though it'll develop," he said.

"Hey!—" shouted Arras.

Landi chuckled, and took the ship down.

THEY burrowed down to the thousand foot level before Landi started to search. The instruments probed the dust for a radius of a thousand feet. At first, they detected nothing. But after the *Dirac* had sunk a further five hundred feet, a warning light came on.

"There's something down

there. Standing clear of the bottom."

"A house?"

"I don't know. We'll soon find out. Any sign of Mezrabium down there?"

"Not a trace."

Landi dropped the ship nearly to the level of the mysterious object, which the instruments told them was roughly conical, projected two hundred feet above a roughly level surface, and was about a hundred feet across at the base. It was honeycombed with small holes about three feet in diameter.

"It *could* be a house. We'll go out and have a look."

"Or it *could* be a missile launching pad. Maybe the owners live underground."

"At least, they haven't seen us yet."

And they fell silent, as though scared the natives would hear.

"Well?"

"It *might* be just a lump of rock."

"It's the aliens," asserted John Landi. "We'll go back—before they see us. Go back—and report."

"We have to be sure. We'd look idiots if it *did* turn out to be a lump of rock."

"I can feel that explosion again."

"Then if that place is an alien house of whatever, you're *not* going to get blown up by it."



"No . . . But suppose this is a launching pad left behind by either the long dead natives or visitors from space? Suppose it is fully automatic, and programmed to fire missiles under certain stimuli." It was an idea.

"Such as?"

"Suppose it had to shoot down alien vessels of large bulk, as they are airborne. Suppose thunderstorms—black, opaque things—look the same to its instruments as the enemy ships, and it fires at them? Same as it fired when Frederick's ship came in range?"

"We're conjecturing too much. The only way to find out is to go and have a look," said Arras, grimly.

TEN minutes later, the two field-protected figures slipped through the dust. It still made them tingle, but the intensity of the charge was less at lower levels than it was near the surface.

"D'you think *delvin* will ever take the form of esp, to let us see where we're going?" Arras asked, grumpily.

Landi chuckled. "For somebody who once told me to clear *delvin* out of my birdish brain, you've got it quite heavily on your mind."

"Maybe I'm wrong," Arras said. He still had that nagging feeling that "a little bit of sight could be better than nothing."

Landi sounded pleased. "It can't be more than a few yards, now. Whoops—my screen has just bumped into it."

A moment later, they were both gliding across the surface of the rock. After a while, they came to one of the holes—a big one, larger than the three feet the instruments had indicated.

Landi followed Arras into it, crawling on his hands and knees, and with his force-field switched off.

It came to a dead end after twenty yards. It was like any cave on Earth. Rough, shapeless, entirely natural. There was no sign of it either having been built, or being used.

"That seems to be that," said Arras. "No life. And no automatic launching pad. This world is finally, irrevocably proved to be sterile."

They made their way back to the ship.

"The atomic explosions are quite natural," said Landi. "I suppose we'll just have to report that they are due to undefined but natural sources. So let's get away from here before the undefined natural cause catches us up."

Arras laughed. "Right. Away we go. That's what you've been waiting for, isn't it?"

But Landi then said, doubtfully, "I wish we could find out *how* they take place. Dammit,

in spite of all we've been through, in spite of the alienness of this planet, we're still left with our original problem, the reason we were sent here in the first place—it's simply impossible for an unpremeditated atomic explosion to take place."

Arras, too, changed his tack. "I think we should continue to search."

THERE was a long pause, then the xenologist spoke again, his voice slow and low and—tired. "Why have we both become so mixed up about this? We don't know whether we're coming or going. We don't know what to think—and so we don't know what to do. I feel completely empty, hollow, going through the motions. I think you do, too. We've examined the data our instruments have given us. That's told us nothing. So we started kicking ideas about. We've been leaping at any fresh possibility. We've been jumping at every bit of inspiration we've picked up.

"There's only one scientific way to tackle the job—explore every inch of this planet. To do that, we'd need a whole fleet of ships and thousands of personnel. We shouldn't have bothered to come in the first place—but how were we to know that life would be so hard to find? Invisible, undetectable by normal, physical means. We know as

much as we did when Yernolds first briefed us—no, we're a lot worse off. We weren't confused then, as we are now. All that's come out of this is a softening of our original assertions—I'm not so sure that an alien intelligence is behind everything, and you're not so sure there *isn't* life here."

"And our softened attitudes have been caused by nothing but our own failure to find the answer," said Landi.

"The only thing that hasn't changed is your *delvin*," said Arras.

"I've not said anything before about it—but I have a hunch the answer lies there," said Landi.

"You have? Do you know the reason I've been harping on it ever since we had that—er—talk just after landing? Because I've had the very same feeling."

"You're not a *delviner*, are you?"

"No. Just an ordinary guy who gets hunches."

"Ever since I arrived here, I've been trying to remember some dreams I had when I was summoned to Yernold's office. There were two—the first was a nightmare about what might happen if the authorities found out about me. I was always having them. The second—the man who fetched me said I was reciting a list of elements. The last on the list was Mezrabium—and

apparently I screamed that one out. Why? Since then, I've kept seeing visions of explosions Mezrabium explosions, presumably. But there was no explosion in the dream.

"As you said yourself, one of the theories of the *delvin* is that it is no more than a kind of intimacy with the structure of matter and the laws which govern it. It's a sense which may one day allow one to perceive the structure of an object, to analyze it, and from that determine what will happen in the normal course of events to that object, provided man doesn't interfere with it. At this early stage of development of the faculty, we see the end result—the landslide, or the nova. Since anything affected by an intelligence brings in variables which aren't covered by their natural laws, the *delvin* becomes useless.

"I'm very puzzled over why I should have called out that list of elements in my sleep."

"Maybe it was an analysis of the elements of Zelerinda."

"I thought of that. But what kind of analysis? Was it quantitative? When I get back, I must find that man and ask him if I was also listing figures next to the names." He shook his head. "Our problem has been well-nigh insoluble from the analytical point of view. It's been just as much of a problem from

the *delviner*. If an intelligent agency causes the explosions, I would foresee them. And a natural cause is impossible."

"It's a rotten problem."

AND the wall of dust around them threw the sentence back at them, mockingly. Landi glared at it. "I thought it was wonderful stuff at first. But now—I look on it the same way as I look on those dirty thunderclouds. It resembles them in more ways than one, too," he added, gloomily.

"What do you mean?"

"They're both full of electrostatic electricity."

"So?"

"Just a thought. A beautiful thought."

"Hold it," shouted Arras. "It's more than just a thought. As you said, it's a *beautiful*, beautiful thought. Suppose—suppose those *clouds* are the life forms? A gaseous form of life, made out of molecules of Mezrabium, oxygen, electrostatic charges and radioactivity. I watched them being born, growing and dying—and I never suspected. Conscious, *aware* entities which start life as babies, tiny little cumuli. Suppose they grow and grow and grow until they reach maturity. And suppose, like human beings, they like fighting. So they toss concentrated chunks of themselves at other clouds. No, that

doesn't quite fit the facts. Suppose the thunderclouds are a type of life which lives past maturity—don't die like ordinary clouds. Suppose the ordinary ones look upon certain of these as a kind of demon—and destroy them. Using telekinesis, they hurl two lumps of Mezrabium at the thunderstorm and when the two lumps are in its body, bring them together with a bang. With a damned big bang."

He fell silent. His thoughts had come to an end.

"Possibly," said Landi.

"Though unlikely. But we must by all means search there. I don't think the clouds are life themselves—but they may be the medium in which life could develop."

They came to the *Dirac* and literally flung themselves inside. Arras gunned the motors and they raced towards the surface, the force field pressed against the hull by the resistance of the dust. They burst into the clear air with a flurry of blue sparks.

VI.

ARRAS looked around him.

"All right. Which one?"

There were a hundred woolly clouds to choose from.

"A small one."

The *Dirac* darted towards a small, firm cloud. They approached it from its dark, slight-

ly concave underbelly. As they got nearer, the ship bobbed and lurched in the upcurrents feeding the cloud. Around them, the air, once bright and sunny, became grey as the cloud shadow enveloped them.

It sobered them. Levelled out their bouyant mood.

"If there is life here, what form will it take?"

"Probably very tenuous," said Arras, "with highly developed telekinetic faculties."

"So it won't need rockets to throw its bombs . . ."

"I never said it would."

"We're inside!"

The interior of the cloud was like the interior of the dust, but with one not so subtle difference—there was light all around them. It was the light of the sun, diffused by the Mezrabium droplets into a uniform glow—a glow without direction.

"This is the light you *delvined*," said Arras.

"There was a blast sensation with my light," said Landi. "Can you see anything?" he went on, after they'd been bobbing about in the upcurrents for a few minutes. Arras had been carefully inspecting the surface of the force field for signs of any minute organisms. He shook his head, cut out the field for a moment and sent a sampler out into the body of the cloud. The contents were thrust into an

analyzer, which clicked and blurred for a few moments. At length, it displayed its result on a small screen.

"Nothing," said Arras.

"Let's get out of here," said Landi. "This cloud-flying—it's unnerving. All this turbulence—I always thought clouds were such dainty, peaceful things. It keeps making me feel that we're upside-down, on our sides—any position but the right way up.

"We won't find anything here."

"The big clouds, though," murmured Arras.

A moment later, the *Dirac* burst out of the side of the cloud. Landi breathed heavily. So heavily that Arras, piloting, turned round him. The rough scientist had relaxed his body-frame and his eyes were screwed shut.

"I wonder what he *delvins* this time?" Arras thought. He looked round the sky, spotted a heavy black cloud about fifteen miles away. "There's a real beauty. Only a couple of minutes to get there," he said.

There was no response from Landi.

HE took the ship below the cloudbase again, and sped from cloud to cloud, as though hopping over inverted islands.

About halfway to the big cloud, already beginning to grow

the characteristic anvil, he heard Landi begin to speak.

"There is something growing in that thunderstorm. No, not one thing. Many things."

"Life!" said Arras.

"Not life." To himself, not to the xenologist.

"But only life grows. That is the unique property of life—growth."

But if Landi heard, he made no comment. Instead, he began to describe a world—a curious, incredible world.

"A world of violence. Of tremendous currents, both rising and falling. Of turbulence without parallel. In the world, there are many layers, like zones of climate. The uppermost layer is where condensing stops and freezing begins. The top of the cloud is made of snow—cold snow, Mezrabium snow. A fine, powdered snow, finer than the dust. Too light to fall. But it isn't in that layer that the growth is taking place. It is in the upcurrents and the downcurrents where growth occurs."

"Where the dynamic forces of the cloud are greatest. Where the energy lies," said Arras. "That is where life would form—where all the energy is."

"I can *delvin* one particular growth. I'll watch it carefully, now that I can. It consists of pure Mezrabium, frozen solid."

"Elemental Mezrabium? Well,

why not? The pattern of freezing might be such that a form of consciousness ensues. Can you *delvin* the pattern?"

"I am doing that now. At the exact center is a tiny nucleus—a particle of lead oxide. A particle of dust. Round it are a number of concentric layers of Mezrabium . . ."

"Like the rings of a tree trunk! Is it pure Mezrabium?"

"Pure. Not quite pure. There are infinitesimal traces of other elements. Oxygen. Chromium. Copper. Caesium. Dozens."

"Just traces. Well, we're nearly all water, with a few traces of other elements," enthused Arras. "There's our native of Zelerinda forming in front of our eyes."

He had stopped the ship for the moment, a couple of miles away from the towering wall of blackness.

"It is in an upcurrent now, being flung at many feet per second towards and through the freezing layer. As it climbs, it takes unto itself the condensing Mezrabium . . ."

"It's feeding itself!"

"It grows larger, heavier. After a time, it's weight becomes too much for the upcurrent in which it sits to hold it. It hovers at one height for a moment, then begins to fall, slowly at first, then more quickly. It sinks a long way. It loses a little of its mass . . ."

"Excretion!" Arras shouted.

"Then it hits an even stronger upcurrent, and is tossed upwards again. It grows even bigger than before . . . God, I can see it again!"

Landi lurched out of his dream-like state and stared at the black wall of menace in front of them.

Arras didn't seem to notice the turbulence marking his partner's face.

He pointed. "There are the natives of Zelerinda. Beings whose world is the tormented, turbulent world of a thunderstorm. What incredible people they must be. I must go in there, capture one, and find out how they live, think, why they fight wars . . ."

HE felt Landi's hand on his. It was cold, dry, almost metallic. "Turn away," he urged.

Arras shook his head. "We'll chance them starting their war while we're inside. I *have* to contact them."

Landi shook his head. "You won't find them."

"Why not? All I have to do is find an updraught. That should not be too difficult."

"There is no life. You see, I saw them with my *delviner*."

"Yeah. Your *delvin*. You just said you've got it sorted out. Fully developed. An intimacy with matter. What is life that you can't analyze its structure

same as you can a normal object. All right, so it's not life. What the hell is it, then?"

"I don't know. I feel I ought to, but I don't."

"Then it's life—and we're going to find out what makes its hot little heart tick." He moved the *Dirac* towards the black wall.

"Stop!"

Landi tried to snatch the controls from Arras. The xenologist held them firmly, and aimed the ship for the blackest part of the cloud. "Where the strongest currents will be. The most fertile realm of the cloud."

They moved under the edge of the cloud. The lower parts were ragged, torn by winds which thrust at them from all sides. Directly ahead, there was more than a blackness in the air. It began to rain. Landi had stopped trying to wrest the controls from Arras. His eyes narrowed, delving—or *delvin*ing—deep into the cloud again, although he appeared to be watching the rain splashing against the force field. Arras was conscious of a soft, sougning sound as the rain washed over them. A moment later, the blackness in the air became worse, and the sougning turned to a clatter, like that of rifle bullets against a steel wall.

Landi opened his eyes, obviously disturbed by the sound. They were filled with a sudden horror. With a superhuman ef-

fort, he forced Arras away from the controls and flung the ship into a dive away from the cloud. He pulled the *Dirac* out a few feet from the surface, only half under control. The ground rushed past. Rocky outcrops loomed up, swept past to the right and to the left of them as, like a demon, he flung the ship about. They passed over Frederick Landi's survey ship. As they did so, he pulled the *Dirac* into a climb—a climb which did not stop until they were in the blackness of space.

The safety of the naked void.

At length, Arras picked himself up and said: "You went mad! What happened?"

"Nothing—luckily," Landi
lipped. "Watch that cloud."

Even at their height, the thunderstorm was an awesome sight. Its anvil had grown quite enormous, spreading a cover over many miles of the land below. For a minute, nothing happened. Then the upper surface of the cloud lit up, as though a gigantic fire had been lit underneath it, and the anvil was torn asunder. For a while, chaos reigned below then the deceptively peaceful form of the mushroom cloud replaced it, rushing up towards them until it appeared that it would join them in orbit.

"And so the natives of Zelerinda are snuffed out," Arras said, sadly. "I'll wager that the
(Continued on next page)



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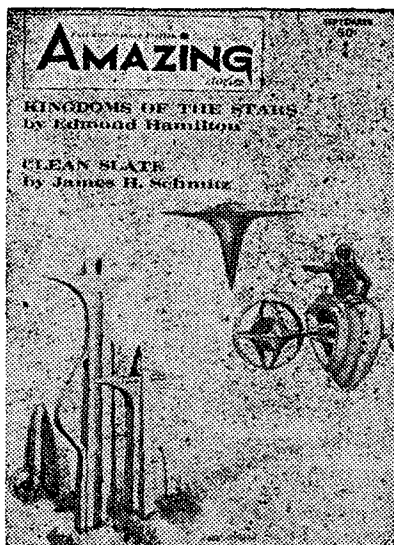
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Edmond Hamilton returns in the September issue of **AMAZING** with **Kingdoms of the Stars**, a long novelet of such sweep and excitement that we have already asked him to write a sequel. Sit, next month, with Gordon in a psychiatrist's office, trying to find out if he is suffering from delusions, or whether he actually saw the Drowned Suns, heard Throon's crystal peaks, annihilated space, and loved Lianna. And learn the truth.

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Be sure to get this September issue of **AMAZING**. It will be on sale at your newsstand August 6.

whole of the growth of civilization occurs in each of those tragic clouds, from the primitive, unthinking creature to the atomic age, when they learn to use their environment—with a vengeance. Some wipe themselves out—but most appear to survive, since their clouds don't explode but simply fade away. Perhaps they are the ones that learn better than to meddle with their environment . . ."

Landi thought he saw a tear steal from the corner of the xenologist's eye. For a moment, he hesitated. Should he tell the man the truth? Should he spoil everything for him?

"And poor Frederick Landi—he happened to fly too near a cloud which was approaching its doom. I wonder if the race that killed him by accident ever knew he was there?"

Landi shook his head. "No. They never knew. For there were never any beings there. Zelerinda is as sterile as the depths of the space between the last galaxy and infinity. The thing I saw in the upcurrents, wafted up and down until it reached critical mass was no more than a hailstone."

There was a long silence.

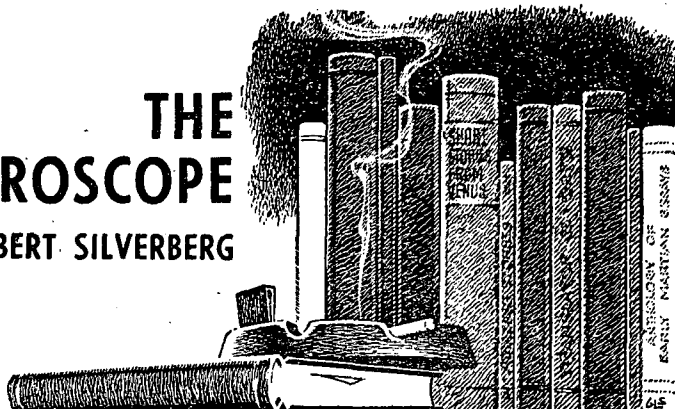
Then Landi slapped Arras on the shoulder.

"They get them on Earth, if the storms are big enough. In the tropics."

THE END

THE SPECTROSCOPE

By ROBERT SILVERBERG



Starswarm, by Brian Aldiss: 159 pages. Signet, 50¢.

The jacket copy labels this one a "chronicle-novel." Don't believe it. What we have here is simply another short story collection by the gifted and imaginative Brian Aldiss—neither a chronicle nor a novel. Seven of the nine stories first saw print in those two fine British magazines, *NEW WORLDS* and *NEBULA SCIENCE FICTION*. The other two have been published here by *FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION*.

The "chronicle-novel" gimmick is not simply a bit of false labelling by the publisher, though. The author has made an effort to yoke these nine stories into a semblance of unity by providing a framework and an italicized commentary. Unfortunately, this has done more harm than good. The framework is

rickety, the commentary is sententious and ponderously coy. Much more seriously, Aldiss has tinkered with the stories themselves, jamming in little passages here and there to weld them into his jury-rigged background. This is sometimes quite devastating to a story, as in the fine, hard little tale of future war, "Hearts and Engines." In its magazine version (as "Soldiers Running") this one quite obviously took place on Earth of the near future, and much of its meaning and power derives from that. In *Starswarm*, though, Aldiss has seen fit to transfer the action to an alien world of the remote future called "Drallab," but has left the characters with names like "Mary" and "Sergeant Taylor." Hence, occasional references to Drallab become illusion-shattering intrusions.

There are plenty of other irritating things about this book. Aldiss at his best is an astonishingly able writer, but all too often his mannerisms get the better of him, and his work becomes slipshod, overcute, and sticky. Matters of literary craftsmanship don't seem to interest him much when he's in such phases, apparently; a lot of his work reflects a (perhaps unconscious) contempt for his audience and for his medium. Nearly every story in this book displays these maddening tendencies of his; a few are killed stone dead by them.

Yet this wildly uneven book includes some top-drawer material. The best, to my taste, is a strange and powerful story called "O Moon of My Delight," which takes place on a planet that serves as a kind of shock-absorber for faster-than-light spaceships coming out of overdrive. The scientific side of s-f is not Aldiss' strong point, but here he puts forth an interesting and novel idea, and develops it against a background of superbly handled human conflicts.

Then there's the spooky and memorable "Shards," experimental in technique and stunning in impact, and the high-spirited, flamboyantly funny "Legends of Smith's Burst," which reminds me in an odd way of the screwball novellas Don

Wilcox used to write for AMAZING and FANTASTIC in the 1940's. The closing story in the book, "Old Hundredth," is sensitive and moving.

The other five stories strike me as flawed in various ways, and generally annoying to read. Unhappily, the longest story in the book is also the worst—"The Game of God," a woeful potboiler of a novelet which takes many thousands of words to worry a potentially good idea to death. In short, a misguided and lamentable book, and a vivid demonstration of the dangers of brilliance. But read it anyway.

The Best From Fantasy and Science Fiction, Ninth Series, (1959), edited by Robert P. Mills. 256 pages. Ace Books, 40¢.

I hope the publishers of AMAZING STORIES won't take it amiss if I use the next few paragraphs to laud a competitor. For this collection of short stories from F&SF is so stunningly good that it deserves the highest praise, and any lover of science fiction can only rejoice and cry hosannah for such a volume.

There are sixteen stories, all published in 1958 and 1959. None is less than excellent. Four stories in particular stand out. There is Daniel Keyes' unforgettable and much-reprinted "Flowers for Algernon," a Hugo win-

ner that will probably see print many more times. There is Robert Heinlein's dazzling "All You Zombies—," in which the man who wrote that time-travel classic, "By His Bootstraps," demonstrates in a bawdy and brilliant way that he still had something left to say on the subject. There is Alfred Bester's "The Pi Man," whose characteristically Besterian technique is at once a joy and a dismay to less gifted writers. And there's Theodore Sturgeon's touching and successfully poetic "The Man Who Lost the Sea."

The second level is still pretty spectacular: Avram Davidson's "Dagon," William Tenn's sly "Eastward Ho!," Damon Knight's puzzling and disturbing "What Rough Beast," and Ron Goulart's dissection of the Lovecraft cult, "Ralph Wollestonecraft Hedge: A Memoir." Ranking just as high in my rating are Walter S. Tevis' "Far From Home," George P. Elliott's "Invasion of the Planet of Love," and R. M. McKenna's "Casey Agonistes," written long before he attained best-sellerdom with *The Sand Pebbles*.

There are five other tales in the book, and they're pretty good too. Few collections of stories from a single magazine have ever been as memorable as this one. Obviously a must for a science fiction library.

Escape on Venus, by Edgar Rice Burroughs. 254 pages. Ace Books, 40¢.

A few months back, in this column, I delivered myself of a sweeping attack on the recent and astonishing Burroughs craze. The words I used—sending shivers down the spines of a horde of ERBians—were "unmitigated trash" and "subliterate claptrap," among others.

I now find myself in the awkward position of having to eat a couple of those flamboyant epithets, because here is a Burroughs book that I read with considerable pleasure indeed. Mitigated trash and literate claptrap, I suppose—but fun to read. It belongs neither to the Tarzan series nor to the John Carter on Mars series nor to the Pellucidar series, but to another group of Burroughs books dealing with the adventures of Earthman Carson Napier on Venus. I had never read a Carson of Venus tale before, and I had not got very far into this one before I made the pleasant discovery that it's a spoof on the other Burroughs opera. Whereas the romantic entanglements of John Carter and Dejah Thoris strike this reader as unintentionally hilarious rather than noble and touching, the book at hand is deliberately comic—an airy, relaxed burlesque of the Burroughs manner.

Which is not to say that it's any great shakes as a novel. Even by the normal Burroughs standards, *Escape on Venus* suffers from rickets of the plot. Carson and his lady fair, Duare, are carried by a storm into the mysterious northern hemisphere of Venus, and get into successive hassels with four sets of strange lifeforms: fish-men, plant-men, amoeba-men, and finally men-men. The action is repetitious, consisting mostly of capture and escape, and of plot development there is none. Some research shows the reason for this: the book, which first appeared in hard covers in 1946, was pasted together from four novelets originally published in **FANTASTIC ADVENTURES** between March, 1941 and March, 1942. Each of the four followed the same formula, varying only the nature

of the foe, and it's unsurprising that the book version shows the same up-and-down structure.

Yet it doesn't really matter. The lighthearted gusto of Burroughs' style carries the reader along, and there's plenty of fun for the forty cents. Duare gets involved with an amorous amoeba, the goddess of the plant people is a teleported Brooklynite, and—well, it's a hard book to dislike. A lovely Krenkel jacket painting, too.

ALSO NOTED:

Regan's Planet, by Robert Silverberg. 141 pages. Pyramid Books, 40¢. A novel of the 1992 World's Fair.

Time of the Great Freeze, by Robert Silverberg. 192 pages. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, \$3.50. Teenage novel about the next ice age.



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... or so you say



Dear Editor:

I am what could be termed a "balanced diet" reader, interested in most every phase of the imaginative literature field, from strictly science fiction to fantasy and weird-horror, to short-shorts and full length novels. Sometimes when I have just a few minutes to spare a short-short can fill the bill, but if I have hours on my hands a novel will do just as well. This is what I mean by balanced diet reading, and your magazines give it all to me—some others don't.

Other than these above mentioned general items, I have especially enjoyed the Z-D pubs for publishing things like Zelazny's "The Graveyard Heart," Leiber's Fafhrd and Mouser series, and the latest serial-novel by Phyllis Gotlieb. Concerning this latter, as opposed to some fans, I enjoy serials, the waiting, etc. . . .

The covers Emsh has been doing for you are excellent, as are

his interiors. Finlay is pretty good, too, though I suppose space is inhabited by only one kind of spaceman judging by the monotonous repeating he does from illo to illo. Oh, and I'd like to know, by any chance are Adragna and Adkins the same person? Their artwork is so much alike, and that one name . . . Adragna? [Ed. Note: No.]

Your latest innovation, that of Silverberg doing the book reviews, is a welcomed relief over your old reviewer. I can't completely agree with him concerning "The Game Players of Titan," however. I think Philip Dick's book was more than excellent. I do think, however, he left himself open for a sequel.

Talking about sequels, how about talking Roger Zelazny into writing one to "The Graveyard Heart?" I think there is more to be said yet about the future he's created, and the characters. Anything more from him lined up

soon? He's one of the best new writers to pop up in a long time.

I've just moved to Cleveland and though I know there are s-f fans hereabouts, I don't know just exactly where. Perhaps you can ask any in the area to write to me. Thanks.

Duane Richardson
c/o Maurice Brown
Apartment #6
1988 East 59th Street
Cleveland, Ohio

● *Looks like we've anticipated your preferences. A two-part serial by Zelazny will appear in Amazing along about the first of the year.*

Dear Editor:

The Emsh cover on your May issue is superior to the general run of Ziff-Davis covers; in fact, it is the best you've had this year, to my mind. "Boiling Point" is one of those clever little things which leave me cold. The solution to this was obvious from the beginning, and the appeal of this type of puzzle story is the mystery-story element. They must follow the same rules as a detective story: the clues must be available to the reader, but not thrust at him, so that it is possible to logically arrive at the solution before the author with intelligence, a little knowledge, and careful reading. Hal Clement is a master at that; in-

deed, his best novel, *Mission of Gravity*, is composed in large measure of a sequence of adroit little puzzles. At any rate, this is a failure.

"The Crime and the Glory of Commander Suzdal" struck me as being somewhat pointless, and the solution to Suzdal's problem was pulled right out of the hat. I am not at all fond of Cordwainer Smith, and this is down to his usual standards.

I finally was able to read "Sunburst." Goody. Big deal. The idea, or basic theme/plot, of a science fiction story is by nature fantastic; need this apply to the setting, the characters, and the plot proper? I cannot conceive of an America, presumably still under a democracy, tolerating twenty years or so of martial law in any city; every two-bit muckraker and poor man's Lincoln in Congress would go higher than a kite, the people who heard about this Poor Benighted City would scream for the government to Do Something, and there would be a general stink perceptible all over the world. Furthermore, most of the characters are exaggerated almost beyond belief at some time in the story, marring the usually good characterization of Prothero and Presster. And as for the plot, it is so incoherent toward the end that as I finished the book I only had a vague sort of feeling that the

right side had won. As Ted Johnstone said, "Disbelief should be willingly suspended, not hanging by the neck until dead."

There was more to the Norman Conquest than reported in your editorial. When William and company swept into a nearby town, intent upon looting, a forger of gold and maker of jewelry attempted to safeguard his stock. He was immediately executed by one of the soldiers, an exiled Spaniard, with the remark, "Seelly goldsmith."

John Boston
816 South First St.
Mayfield, Kentucky

● *Enough already, of William the Conqueror, before he turns into Benedict Breadfruit.*

Dear Editor:

I have never written to a SF prozine but the letter by Mr. Jim Hawkins forced me to words.

The "discussion" for the last few issues seemed to be running on a laud/complaint type of letter in the lettercol. Then a Mr. Stricklen in the November issue put his finger on the problem and you gave the correct answer. In the March issue, Mr. Hawkins summed up Fandom's point of view perfectly, between the lines that is. That point of view is: "not too many of us give much of a damn about *what* N.E.O. Fan thinks . . ." And do you know,

he is right. I am N.E.O. Fan but I am not N.O.V.I.C.E. and if anyone wants to read what this neo thinks read this:

Mr. N.E.O. Fan is the new generation of readers. Most of us have never seen an UNKNOWN, WONDER, or an old AMAZING or ASTOUNDING. The proverbial "golden age" to us is *now*. When we think of the '30s and '40s its usually in a historic sort of way.

The number of neo fans in this country is growing. A big booster is BOYS' LIFE who, for example, published "The Sunjammer" a novelet by Arthur C. Clarke. This monthly magazine, circulation 2,200,000 of mostly teenage boys and Boy Scouts, has published other s-f including *The Star Dwellers*, a novel by James Blish, and *The Man*, a short-story by Ray Bradbury.

Another neo-spawning ground is in Comics. Some very good s-f has appeared in some National Periodicals Publications written mainly by Gardner Fox and some by Edmond Hamilton and with art mainly by Murphy Anderson, Sid Greene, and Carmen Infantino, with some by John Giunta and Wallace Wood. These are edited by Julius Schwartz.

Mr. Hawkins wants a fmz (a funny little word that means an amateur publication) review column. Well, (how did he put it) Mr. High-and-Mighty-Editor(?), anyway, I read one once and

. . . OR SO YOU SAY

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I was absolutely bored to tears. I would rather have an extra page of letters than that.

He also wants *you* to give Fandom something to be interested in. Well what does he think the cockeyed stories are for? What's he been reading AMAZING for? To hear from his old buddy from New York?

George Inzer
116 RedLane Circle
Birmingham 15, Alabama

● *Not if his old buddy has the same opinions of him that you do!*

Dear Editor:

Thorpe's story, "Now Is Forever," in the March issue, is a good example of first-rate science fiction: taking an existing idea and running as far with it as the imagination allows.

People have been talking about duplicating machines that will transform raw materials into anything (or anybody) for a number of years. Arthur C. Clarke even devoted a chapter to the idea in *Profiles Of The Future*. Certainly the vision of instantaneous transformation of matter over any distance or into any desired form is a beautiful thing to look forward to.

But there is one hitch that nobody has mentioned in print.

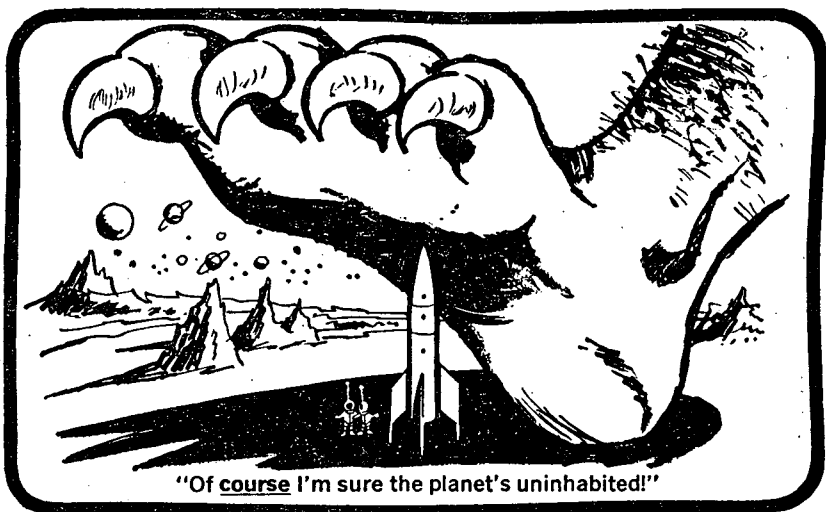
Where does the energy come from? It would take considerable energy for Thorpe's machine to transform carbon and other raw materials into a cigar. Atoms just don't knit together unless you pay the price—and the price is energy. And energy costs money.

So it might seem that the duplicating machine, or matter transformer, is another attempt at the old perpetual motion gambit. The same problem defeats both ideas. You can't get something for nothing. You can't make a Cele Goldsmith out of a rag, a bone, and a hank of hair . . . or even a lot of other stuff, without putting in gobs of energy.

Society would seem safe from Thorpe's civilization-destroying duplicators. Or is it? Just outside my office, there's a zerox machine that has terrified the entire secretarial staff, has a special attendant waiting on its every demand, makes enough noise to double the consumption of aspirin in this end of the building, and occasionally simply refuses to work. Makes nice copies, though.

Ben Bova

● *The initials of that zerox machine couldn't be C. G., could they? The description of its effects sounds very similar—N.L.*



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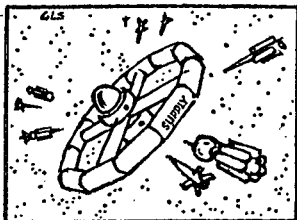
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EDITORIAL

(Continued from page 5)

ings in the land, there have been vast fracturings of the ocean floor and eruptions of undersea volcanoes in the area around Iceland. All of this appears to be convincing the pundits that—if Wegener wasn't altogether right, he may still have had something. Or, as they put it, that his theory has finally become "a rea-

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Felicitations are due to artist Ed Emsh. A pioneer in creative documentary film-making, Emsh recently received a grant from the Ford Foundation to help him produce a film tentatively titled *Relativity*. Emsh was one of 12 winners chosen from a panel of nearly 200 nominees.

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QUALITY

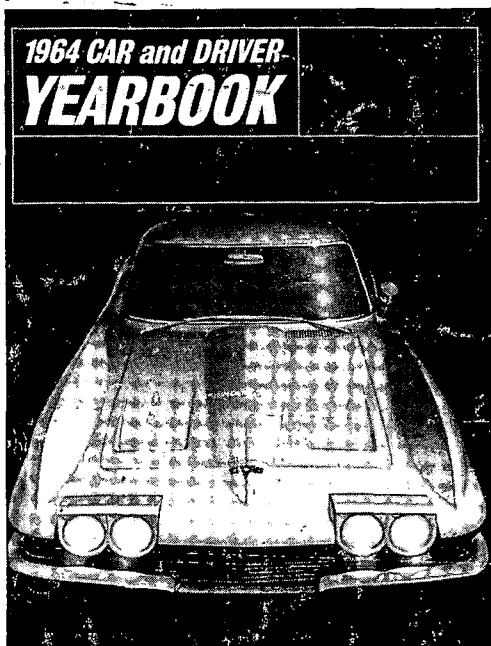
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